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“Free! Body and soul free!”

Kate Chopin’s Unhappy and Unfaithful Wives and the Demand for Women’s Rights

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelen 1800-luvun lopun amerikkalaisen yhteiskunnan naisten asemaan liittyviä ongelmakohtia ja sitä, kuinka Kate Chopin kirjallisessa tuotannossaan vastusti aikansa ajatusmaailmaa sekä kirjallisia konventioita. Keskityn kolmeen Chopinin teokseen, kahteen novelliin, The Story of an Hour ja The Storm, sekä yhteen romaaniin, *The Awakening*. Kaikki kolme teosta sisältävät yhteiskunnallista kritiikkiä ajan amerikkalaista yhteiskuntaa kohtaan. Teoksilla onkin paljon yhteistä. Päähenkilöt teoksissa The Story of an Hour ja *The Awakening* ovat molemmat naimisissa olevia naisia, jotka ovat selkeästi tyytymättömiä mahdollisuuksiinsa. Lisäksi teosten The Storm ja *The Awakening* päähenkilöt ovat molemmat uskottomia aviomiehelleen.

Tutkielman teoriaosuus koostuu Chopinin ajan yhteiskunnallisesta kontekstista ja ajalle tyypillisistä kirjallisuuden traditioista. Taustamateriaalissa esitetään myös yhtymäkohtia feministiseen New Woman -liikkeeseen ja Chopinin omaan elämään.

Naisten aseman ongelmakohtiin kuului muun muassa naisten rajoittaminen kodin piiriin, esimerkiksi kodin ulkopuolisten työmahdollisuuksien ulottumattomiin. Naisen tärkeimpiin tehtäviin kuului jälkikasvun tuottaminen ja näistä huolehtiminen. Lisäksi avioliittojen oletettiin jatkuvan kuolemaan saakka, joten avioeroa ei usein pidetty edes vaihtoehtona onnettoman suhteen päättämiseksi. Naisten seksuaalisuutta pidettiin pitkälti lääketieteellisenä ilmiönä, ja naisia pidettiin luontaisesti intohimottomina. Lisäksi kirjallisuudessa seksuaalisuuteen viitattiin vain varoen, aiheesta puhuttiin tyypillisesti vain vihjaillen ja jättäen lukija täydentämään aukkoja.

Kirjallisuuden konventiot 1800-luvulla sekä heijastivat että tuottivat ajalle tyypillisiä ajatusmalleja. Aikakauden naishahmot jakautuivat usein kahteen tyyppiin, hyveellinen (virtuous) ja langennut (fallen). Tarinat seksuaalisesti avioliiton ulkopuolella aktiivisista, langenneista naisista päättyivät tyypillisesti kyseisen naisen rangaistukseen, usein kuolemaan.

Vain yksi tarkastelemistani teoksista, The Storm, päättyy onnellisesti kahden muun päättyessä päähenkilön kuolemaan. Vaikka päähenkilöt teoksissa The Story of an Hour ja *The Awakening* eivät tulkintani mukaan kuolekaan rangaistuksena teoistaan, on The Stormin loppuratkaisu kuitenkin radikaalimpi. The Storm käsittelee naimisissa olevan naisen uskottomuutta lähes juhlalliseen sävyyn ja päättää tarinan tilanteeseen, jossa kaikki tarinan osapuolet ovat onnellisempia kuin tarinan alussa.

Tällaisen aviorikosta positiiviseen sävyyn esittävän tarinan julkaiseminen 1800-luvun Yhdysvalloissa olisi todennäköisesti osoittautunut mahdottomaksi, eikä Chopinin tiedetä yrittäneenkään julkaista sitä. Kielelliseltä sisällöltään The Storm on avoimempi kuin muut Chopinin teokset, sekä kielen avoimesti seksuaalisen sanaston että tarinan sisällön kannalta. Kaikkein merkittävin ero on kenties kuitenkin sen onnellinen loppuratkaisu.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
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1 Introduction

Few novels have had such a colourful history as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). It was rejected and forgotten when it first appeared in 1899, rejected again in the 1930s, rediscovered in the 1950s and 60s and celebrated by feminists in the 70s (Koloski, "*The Awakening*" 161). During her life, Kate Chopin (1850-1904) gained fame as a local colourist, celebrated for her skills in depicting the simple life of Southerners. This choice of locale gave her a certain freedom to critically discuss women's role in the society, at least until *The Awakening*, as the universal nature of her short stories was often overlooked by male publishers and critics focusing on the descriptions of quaint life in the bayou (Toth, *Unveiling* 150).

But things changed with *The Awakening*. Although Chopin dealt with similar issues, such as unhappy and unfaithful wives, in many of her short stories, none of them created such a backlash as *The Awakening*. One explanation for this is that many of Chopin's more daring stories were published in *Vogue*, which had "a readership accepting of controversial ideas" (Koloski, "The Awakening" 161-162), whereas *The Awakening* went out to everyone (162). Most reviewers, mostly men, condemned the novel, calling it "poison", "morbid", and "unhealthy" (*Unveiling* 220-222). After decades of disapproval and rejection, Chopin's writing was brought to international fame in 1969 by the Norwegian scholar Per Seyersted, who published the first modern Chopin biography, as well as Chopin's complete works (*Unveiling* xix). Despite its colourful history, *The Awakening* and several of Chopin's short stories are now firmly in the American literary canon (xx). As Chopin's writing enjoys continued popularity among scholars and students over a century after her death, the universality of her writing is reaffirmed.

In this study, I will look at some of the ideological and traditional characteristics of late nineteenth-century America, in order to gain a better understanding of the reasons why *The Awakening* was received so poorly at the time of its publishing. By also looking at one of Chopin's short stories, "The Story of an Hour" (1894), published during her lifetime but showing a critical view of marriage, as well as a work that Chopin never even attempted to publish, "The Storm" (written in 1898,

published in 1969), a wider understanding of the contemporary literary conventions and how Chopin defied those conventions can be gained.

These three stories share many common themes and topics, as they all discuss marriage and the limitations it imposes on wives (or in "The Storm", the lack of such limitations). The main characters in "The Story of an Hour", *The Awakening*, and "The Storm" also share many common characteristics, demonstrating Chopin's evident interest and passion toward the hardships of a wife who is challenging her assigned place in a male-dominated society. In "The Story of an Hour" and *The Awakening*, the wives are visibly unhappy in their situations, yearning for a more complete level of independence and freedom. In "The Storm" and *The Awakening*, both wives are unfaithful to their husbands. By reading and analysing all three works and drawing parallels and connections between them, a more complete understanding of Chopin's view on marriage and women's liberation can be gained.

According to my reading, all three works contain strong arguments for women's rights. "The Story of an Hour" through criticising the constraints of marriage and the limited opportunities of wives, and *The Awakening* by developing an elaborate story of a strong, artistic woman who cannot efface herself, and chooses to express her own identity rather than being merely a wife and a mother. "The Storm" stretches the limits of acceptability in her time by celebrating adultery, and leaving the unfaithful wife unpunished. Owing to its daring language and content, "The Storm" is the most revolutionary of these three works.

Also, importantly, two of the three stories I look at end in the death of the protagonist. This is one of the central issues I explore in this study, as the literary conventions of the time generally required "fallen" women, for example wives who were unfaithful, to die. Early American novelists often wrote about the weakness of women at the hands of men, ending their stories by punishing these "fallen" women by death (Wyman 167). This tendency will be discussed in more detail in section 2.2.3. Based on this prevailing literary tradition of punishing sexually misbehaving female characters, the happy ending of "The Storm" was only made possible by Chopin's choice to leave the story unpublished.

I will discuss the works in the order that they were written. Although *The Awakening* is dated 1899, and "The Storm" 1898, *The Awakening* was written before "The Storm", as *The Awakening* was still waiting to be published when Chopin wrote "The Storm". Interestingly, the later stories represent a stronger degree of rejection of the literary conventions of the time, suggesting that Chopin was becoming more daring as her literary career proceeded.

First, in the introduction I will give a brief overview of Chopin's personal life (1.1), as well as take a general look at her choice of themes and topics (1.2). Then, in a chapter on the historical context of late nineteenth-century U.S., I take a look at the general issues regarding inequality between men and women (2.1), the characteristics of traditional women's writing (2.2), as well as the emerging alternative, the New Women (2.3). In the analysis chapters (3.1-3.3), I carry out a close reading of each of the three works, focusing on the implications of the issues discussed in chapter 2.

1.1 Kate Chopin – an unconventional woman

A controversial character herself, many elements of Chopin's personal life can be found in her disobedient female characters. In this brief review of what is known of Chopin's life, I will mostly rely on studies by Emily Toth, the most influential Chopin scholar active to date (Koloski, "*The Awakening*" 168). Toth has written two Chopin biographies, as well as played an important role in increasing Chopin's popularity among university teachers and students by launching the *Kate Chopin Newsletter* in 1975 (168).

Kate Chopin, born Catherine O'Flaherty, was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1850 (Toth, *Unveiling* xiii). She was sent to a boarding school when five years old, but after her father died only two months later in a railway accident, she was brought back home (3, 9). There she grew up in a household ruled entirely by strong women, who handled their own money and made their own decisions (Toth, "What we do and don't know" 13). In the late 1850s and early 1860s, Chopin was enrolled erratically at the boarding school, to continue her education (*Unveiling* 25). She learned to write

French as fluently as English, and later used French expressions for local colour in many of her works (13).

Kate married Oscar Chopin, a dashing Frenchman in 1870 (51, 54). On the day of her wedding, she wrote in her diary "I dressed for my marriage – went to church and found myself married before I could think what I was doing" (55). Nonetheless, Oscar turned out to be a good husband, and the marriage was described as a happy one (72). The couple settled in Louisiana, and had six children between 1871 and 1879 (62, 70).

Oscar died in 1882, leaving Kate thousands of dollars in debt (91-93). As most women in her position would have handed control of their finances over to a male relative, Chopin acted unusually in choosing to run Oscar's businesses herself (93-94). By selling land and property Kate was able to support herself and her children (94), and in 1884, she returned to St. Louis with them (100). Although Chopin mourned the loss of her late husband, she also treasured her independence ("What we do and don't know" 23).

Overall, especially after Oscar's death, Kate was considered an unconventional woman, as she smoked, was "outspoken and aggressive" (18), and did not stay at home as a lady was expected to: "Respectable women were supposed to stay at home … But Kate Chopin kept up her interest in exploring Cloutierville, on horseback and on foot" (*Unveiling* 96). Toth also claims that Chopin most likely had an affair with a married man, Albert Sampite, while living in Louisiana. According to Toth, the affair could have started before Oscar's death, but more certainly it blossomed after it (97).

Despite being an unconventional character herself, Chopin was not a women's rights activist. According to her son, "She was not interested in the women's suffragette movement. But she belonged to a liberal, almost pink-red group of intellectuals, people who believed in intellectual freedom and often expressed their independence by wearing eccentric clothing" (*Unveiling* 112). Clearly, Chopin fits some of the characteristics of the late nineteenth-century New Women, with her eccentric dress and independence from men. In the early 1890s, she was briefly a member of a women's club focused on creating "an organized center of thought and action among

the women of St. Louis" (126), but after less than two years she resigned to spend more time on her writing career (126-127).

Chopin's choice to pursue a career as a writer also defied the conventional expectations for women, as few middle-class women worked outside the home (121). Her professional writing career started in 1889, when she published her first short story, "Wiser than God" (108). From here on, Chopin focused on writing stories which raised contemporary issues about women and marriage.

Altogether Chopin published two novels, two collections of short stories, and dozens of individually published works, such as short stories, poems, and essays ("What we do and don't know" 14). Although her female friends praised *The Awakening*, the harsh criticism she received had an effect on her (24). She seemed to have lost heart, as the publisher of her next story collection, *A Vocation and a Voice* cancelled the contract, and her health was declining (24). She wrote a few, "mostly uninspired" stories, and then, only five years after *The Awakening*, she died (24).

1.2 Chopin's fictional wives and the implied social commentary

What makes the link between Chopin's personal life and her writing all the more interesting, is her tendency to use real people, either people she knew or knew of, as characters in her stories. Chopin based many of her stories on real people, often even using their real names. For example, while living in New Orleans, Chopin had, through her acquaintances, heard of people such as Leonce, described as a "pompous husband … whose wife did not love him" ("What we do and don't know" 17), and Edma Pontillon, "a painter who gave up her art to marry and move to the provinces, where she was sad and unfulfilled" (17), who later gave their names to Edna and Leonce Pontellier in *The Awakening*.

According to Toth, "The Story of an Hour" is another clear example of this, as Chopin tells the story of her mother, Eliza O'Flaherty (*Unveiling* 10). Louise in "The Story of an Hour", like Eliza, is a young wife who is suddenly widowed by a train accident (10). Although Louise is overcome with joy by the new opportunities her

husband's death now brings her, she does not have the happy, long life that Chopin's mother did. The surprise ending of "The Story of an Hour" is discussed in more detail in section 3.1.

Another example of Chopin's use of real people is how she based an entire group of characters on her alleged real-life lover, Albert Sampite. Chopin's most charming and seductive characters, both in *The Awakening*, as well as in "At the 'Cadian Ball" and "The Storm" are named Alcee/Alcée, according to Toth, "the name for all her heroes inspired by Albert Sampite" (*Unveiling* 96). Toth points out how this name could have been created from the shortened form of Albert Sampite, "Al. S-----é" (97). Like Alcée in "At the 'Cadian Ball", Albert was a planter (95). He was also described as a charming man, apart from his temper that came out when he drank (99), like the description of Alcée, who is clearly charming, but "A drink or two could put the devil in his head" ("At the 'Cadian Ball" 303).

In addition to using the names and characteristics of people she knew, Chopin also included many elements from her own life in her stories. She, for example, spent summers with her children on Grand Isle, while living in New Orleans for the rest of the year, just like Edna in *The Awakening*. (*Unveiling* 78-79). Toth also sees it as possible that some of the sensual scenes in works such as "At the 'Cadian Ball" and "The Storm" could be based on real encounters between Chopin and Sampite (96).

The fact that Chopin used real people and other elements of reality in her writing also suggests the reality of the issues she discusses, as her stories are not "just" stories, but are connected to the real world with its very real issues. Despite not being an activist or an overt feminist, Chopin's writing certainly contains ideological elements and sharp and insightful social commentary. Her fictional wives most certainly have real-life implications concerning the lives of unhappy women in marriage.

In addition to these real stories, Chopin's writing involves many repeated patterns and character types. For example, as Mary E. Papke points out, Chopin's earliest complete story, "Emancipation: A Life Fable" (ca. 1869-1870), already explores themes that appear in Chopin's later fiction (Papke 29). In this page-long story, a male animal is trapped in a cage where he was born. The conditions in the cage are pleasant, as there is always food, drink and a comfortable bed available. One day the

door of the cage is left open by accident, and fearfully and slowly the animal enters the outside world. Although life outside is not easy, involving both joy and suffering, "the cage remains forever empty!" ("Emancipation: A Life Fable" 659). A similar theme of leaving behind the familiar and easy way of life for an unstable but more meaningful existence is later on explored in other works, most notably *The Awakening* (Papke 29). There Edna Pontellier goes through a journey of self-discovery, and although she sometimes finds it unpleasant, she would not go back to her former situation, and her symbolic cage of marriage and motherhood remains empty. Like Edna, many of Chopin's protagonists are females that struggle to find their place in society, and achieve a satisfactory level of self-assertion. Many of them are symbolically stepping out of their cages and refusing to go back, and so "Emancipation: A Life Fable", although focused on a male animal, already starts a major theme throughout Chopin's literary career.

Although Chopin focused on marriage in many of her works, she explored many different aspects of it, such as divorce (*At Fault*), yearning for independence ("The Story of an Hour"), pregnancy, and a run-away wife ("Athénaïse"). Moreover, the topic of adultery seems specifically central. Many of Chopin's stories involve infidelity, in addition to *The Awakening* and "The Storm", for example "Her Letters" (1895) and "After the Winter" (1896) concern unfaithful wives, while "A Respectable Woman" (1894) deals with a wife's desire for her husband's friend.

Although adultery has been a hugely popular topic in fiction in European, especially French, literature, during Chopin's time it was still widely condemned in the U.S (*Unveiling* 170-171). One of Chopin's contemporaries, the novelist and magazine editor William Dean Howells, commented on stories on adultery as follows: "No American … would write anything like *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina*, novels about 'guilty love' … And if an American writer tried to do so … What editor of what American magazine would print such a story?" (*Unveiling* 170-171). However, Chopin defied the moral expectations of her time by writing *The Awakening*, a novel that resembles Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in many ways.

Even though adultery had been a popular literary topic in Europe, in Chopin's works it contains clear ideological implications that, for example, *Madame Bovary* does not. Chopin's female characters are portrayed as strong individuals, capable of

making their own choices. This is contrary to the then existing literary archetype of seduction, where women committed adultery as a consequence of weakness, and then were labelled a "fallen woman" (Fiedler 69-70). The central difference then is, between *Madame Bovary* and *The Awakening*, for example, that the female protagonist in Chopin's novel is granted agency. The similarities and differences between these works are discussed in more detail in sections 2.2 and 3.2. By making their own decisions to have affairs, Chopin's unfaithful wives in *The Awakening* and "The Storm" make a strong statement for women's sexual liberation and its benefits.

Although the social commentary in Chopin's works seems evident, she did not aim to provide moral lessons in her works. It is characteristic of Chopin not to tell her readers what to think (*Unveiling* 176), and to leave the endings of her stories ambiguous. Chopin as a writer was opposed to didacticism, both in her own writing and the writing of others (Heilmann, "The Awakening" 92). She offers no moral lessons, just like one of her major literary influences, Guy de Maupassant, whose "amoral" short stories Chopin held in high esteem (*Unveiling* 123). However, the recurring theme of unhappy marriages reveals an implied criticism of women's rights and possibilities in marriage.

Chopin's writing still echoes the spirit of the New Woman, despite the fact that she did not offer moral lessons, and was not a women's rights activist. Chopin wrote most of her works in the 1890s, the height of popularity for New Woman fiction (Heilmann, "The Awakening" 89), and many of her stories centre on themes and topics characteristic for New Woman writers, such as female independence, bodily autonomy, marriage and motherhood (93). Many of her short stories, but especially *The Awakening*, have been seen to have a clear connection with New Woman writing (87, 93). The main character of *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, is clearly a New Woman, who becomes economically and sexually independent of her husband. More characteristics of New Woman writing will be discussed in section 2.3.

Overall, the exact nature of Chopin's societal criticism is not straightforward, as she herself did not identify as a women's rights activist. However, it is clear that her most famous works contain criticism on the limitations marriage imposed on women, as well as arguments for the benefits of women's sexual liberation, along the lines of New Woman ideals.

2 Historical context

The historical context includes both social issues regarding women, such as gender roles and issues with marriage and sexuality, as well as the prevailing literary tradition that both reflected and strengthened the ideologies of the time. In addition to the dominant ideologies and traditions, I will also take a look at the New Woman movement, which aimed to challenge the status quo in the 1890s.

2.1 Contemporary gender issues

In order to fully understand Chopin's characters and fictional worlds, it is important to be familiar with the reality of her day, especially the role of women and the nature of marriage in nineteenth-century U.S.

2.1.1 Gender-specific roles

The roles for men and women were radically different in nineteenth-century America. They were understood and accepted by the majority of the population (Smith Rosenberg and Rosenberg 333). Men were typically the economic providers, supporting their families with their work. This meant that they were in charge of the public sphere, whereas women's responsibilities were mostly limited to the private sphere. These separate spheres allowed women some power, putting them in charge of the home (Lystra 122). In fact, "most Victorian women accepted their domain by gender right and derived some satisfying authority from their role" (142). In unusual circumstances, however, some women were known to pursue economic

independence (130). Kate Chopin herself was forced to do so after the death of her husband, and she was considered to manage exceptionally well for a woman (Toth, *Unveiling* 93).

The ideal Victorian woman's characteristics were "pious, pure, domestic, and submissive" (Lystra 122). In general men were considered to have stronger intellectual capacities, whereas women were seen as more emotionally vulnerable, or even irrational (126). The general limitations imposed on women's opportunities caused by these assumptions of women's lesser capabilities are a key theme in Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894). This story is centred upon depicting the feelings of emancipation that the young wife, Louise Mallard, feels after her husband's sudden death. Because of the gender roles in the society, Louise has felt trapped, especially because of the necessity to remain in the private sphere, devoting herself to her husband's needs.

There was high emphasis on woman's role as a child-bearer, and that was used as the basis for keeping women out of higher education. Many physicians in the mid-nineteenth century thought that the female reproductive organs were not compatible with intellectual activities, as "The brain and ovary could not develop at the same time" (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 340). This caused concerns, voiced by one physician as follows: "Why spoil a good mother by making an ordinary grammarian?" (340). A woman who did not marry and have children was seen as a failure (336).

Woman's worth depending on her ability to produce healthy offspring is also a central topic in Chopin's fiction, as for example the protagonist in *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, struggles to fit in with the "mother-women", described by her as: "women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (*The Awakening* 8). Despite being married with two children, Edna is not one of these women. Her quest for a more independent lifestyle clashes with the social expectations of a self-sacrificing wife and mother.

Despite some resistance and disapproval, the numbers of females in higher education were steadily rising (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 341). However, the goals of

education for women were still mostly focused on making better wives and mothers, continuing to limit women to the private sphere (Lystra 127). The issue was complex: "While middle-class men in the nineteenth century may have been reluctant to give up their long-standing claim to intellectual superiority, many willingly accepted more intellectual parity in their romantically defined involvements with women. What men found threatening was any hint of women's mental superiority" (127). Hence, the attitudes towards women's education were improving, but only up to a certain point.

After the Civil War people were more conscious of the issues of gender roles and the limitations caused by them, which created more tension towards the end of the century (Lystra 124). The Civil War itself was one factor in this development. As women were forced out of the feminine sphere during and after the war, they learned new skills and had to adapt to managing in a new way (147). Even though awareness was growing and tensions rising, there were not many concrete changes in men and women's practical role behaviour before the twentieth century (147). Very few women were committed to overt feminism, due to the stigma attached, but many more supported more covertly some female rights, such as birth control, since these issues concerned all men and women (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 339). Still, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, many women were growing dissatisfied with their limited opportunities. More on first wave feminism and the New Woman as a social and literary movement will follow in chapter 2.3.

2.1.2 Marriage and divorce

There were certainly both happy and unhappy marriages in nineteenth-century America (Lystra 205). During this time period many changes were taking place, for example the choice of partner was already a personal one, not based on parental decisions or purely economic factors. Parental consent was no longer more than a formality, and even as such usually only concerned the parents of the bride (159-160). Even if the family chose to object, lovers would typically go through with the marriage anyway, as romantic love was placed before any other obligations (162).

The only form of control parents typically employed was manipulating the social circle of their child, thus directing their children toward suitable candidates (164).

The general view at the time was that the premarital process of courtship was much more romantic and exciting in comparison with the safe and practical, although still loving, nature of marriage (157). This is connected to one of the central contradictions of Victorian marriage: "An act of self-determined choice, Victorian marriage nonetheless imposed a set of mandatory sex-role specific duties upon husband and wife" (192). So, although marriage was based on personal choice and romantic feelings, what happened next was strictly determined by social duties. After marriage, the social obligations stepped in as wives were expected to follow the earlier described duties of a submissive housewife, taking care of the home and the children. If a marriage was failing, it would be seen as a failure to perform the roles at an acceptable level, and the solution to problems was seen to be better role performance: "stop nagging or be a better provider" (213). As the result of these strict roles, women were still typically financially dependent first on their fathers, and later on their husbands. This dependence is evident in Chopin's writing, as for example in "Athénaïse" (1896) the young runaway wife is fully dependent on her brother for financial support while being away from her husband.

As marriage was based on romantic love that was expected to continue after the wedding, the expectations of marital happiness were higher than in the earlier centuries: "Caught between the lower expectations for marital happiness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the increasing acceptability of divorce in the twentieth, nineteenth century middle-class suitors were forced to cope with the soaring emotional expectations of marriage and the still socially tainted prospect of divorce" (Lystra 157). Thus, higher expectations were coupled with no escape from a failed marriage. The lack of a way out from a displeasing marriage is explicitly discussed in "Athénaïse", where the young wife has no socially acceptable way of leaving her husband. The brother of the wife is disappointed to hear that her sister's husband is not abusive or drink excessively, as consequently divorce is not an option for her ("Athénaïse" 358). In fact, up until as late as the 1960s in American divorce law, there had to be a party at fault in order for a divorce to be carried out. In other words, one of the spouses had to be found guilty of some form of misbehaviour such

as “Adultery, extreme cruelty, and desertion … insanity, conviction of a crime, habitual drunkenness and drug addiction” (Evans 472). Even with such justification, in the nineteenth century divorce was seen as a failure to adequately fulfil the marital roles, as Victorians continued to insist that marriage should continue until death (Lystra 194). This clashed with the already prevailing ideology of individual freedom:

> Nineteenth-century culture applauded the application of the ideal of individual freedom to a variety of social situations, but fought against its application within marriage, clinging to older traditions of social responsibility tied to spousal role obligations. It is only in the twentieth century that the romantic “logic” of choosing a mate, already in place by the mid-nineteenth century, was fully extended to the conception of dissolving a marriage. (226)

Thus, nineteenth-century marriage was not without ideological contradictions, as both the socially determined marital roles and the objectionable nature of divorce were causing tensions.

The problematic consequences presented by the “marriage until death” ideology are also depicted in *The Awakening*, although less explicitly than in “Athénaïse”. In *The Awakening* Edna has successfully moved away from her husband to her own apartment, and established a new, independent life style. However, her lover Robert fails to understand that she is no longer (or ever was) a possession of her husband. This causes Robert to flee the situation, since divorce is not even an option in his way of thinking.

The unhappy wives in the stories that I am going to take a close look at are struggling specifically because of the nature of contemporary marriage. None of the wives that I analyse are victims of domestic abuse; in fact, their husbands are often described to be gentle and loving. However, it is marriage itself that causes their unhappiness, as they are oppressed by the social obligations of a married woman, being limited to the private sphere. This goes on to show that even though Victorian marriages were already based on personal choice and mutual affection, the following strict marital duties, and the lack of a feasible way out, were to blame for the unhappiness of some of Chopin’s female characters.

2.1.3 Sexuality

Sexual politics in nineteenth-century America were not untroubled, as sexual ideologies were directly connected to relationships between men and women. Both physical issues, such as a wife's duty to her husband and matters related to reproduction, as well as more immaterial matters, such as women's assumed passionlessness and a higher level of expected moral purity in comparison with their male counterparts, are central to the formation of power structures between men and women.

For the majority of Victorian Americans, the main attribute of female sexuality was that of innate passionlessness (Freedman 201), as being sexual was considered to be "at odds with the moral or spiritual in nineteenth-century culture, especially with respect to women" (Lystra 60). However, within the private sphere, between married couples, some openly sexual discourse can be found, as Karen Lystra has exhibited in her book *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992). By taking a look at the private correspondences of married couples, Lystra dismisses the stereotype of an asexual Victorian woman. She claims that "Middle-class American women gave no private indication that they believed in an ideal of female passionlessness" (58). Nonetheless, sexuality in general was still strictly limited to the private sphere (88).

One influential theory that reinforced the prevailing ideas of female passionlessness was Darwin's theory of sexual selection, which alongside his evolutionary theory was widely spread and accepted by virtually every scientist and thinker by the 1870s (Bender 5). According to Bender, Chopin has long been known to have read the new natural history, and she accepted, but quarrelled with Darwin's theories (197). She questioned his views on the female role in sexual selection, "especially his views on the inferiority of women and, most emphatically, his theory of the female's modesty: her passivity in the sex drama as a creature without desire" (197-8). In Chopin's writing the female plays a much more active role. According to Bender, for example Edna displays natural desire in *The Awakening.* Furthermore, Calixta and Clarissa in "At the 'Cadian Ball'" (1892) – a prequel to "The Storm" – "exert the power to

select in sexual selection" (206). As the couplings are made by the women instead of the men, Chopin is turning the situation around, demonstrating a type of female sexual selection. This theme is also present in *The Awakening*, as Edna chooses Robert, a younger, more attractive man as her lover instead of her husband (217).

As mentioned earlier, the worth of a woman was largely based on her ability to produce healthy offspring, and "female sexuality was, by definition, linked to reproduction" (Freedman 200), not any form of passion. This became the topic of much discussion as the white marital birth rates were steadily declining towards the end of the nineteenth century. The amount of births per woman dropped from 7.04 in 1800 to only 3.56 in 1900 (Freedman 197). In fact, towards the end of the century there were concerns that the birth-rates in America were too low, and the blame was put on "female sexual failure" (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 352), as women were considered to bear insufficient amounts of offspring.

Many explanations are offered to explain this drop, primarily the use of contraception, abortions and abstinence. The possibility of family limitation brought women many new opportunities, as "married women could begin to consider, probably for the first time, alternative life-styles to that of multiple pregnancies extending over a third of their lives" (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 346). Family planning could give women a new type of liberty to control their own bodies, and pursue independence in the public sphere. However, as the substance of womanhood was so heavily based on the area of reproduction, the topics of birth control and abortion had a lot of stigma attached to them, and the seemingly progressive developments in this field did not please everyone.

Although both birth control and abortions were widely practiced all over the United States, in the 1860s "medical societies throughout the country passed resolutions attacking the prevalence of abortion and birth control and condemning physicians who performed and condoned such illicit practices" (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 344). Widespread campaigns to criminalize abortion and birth control by male physicians and other men in power aimed to maintain the status quo in male-female separate spheres, as the topic became politicized. Abortions were criminalized in the United States by 1880, except when necessary to save a woman's life (Ravitz). This male attempt to control women by controlling their sexuality is

most clearly seen in the medical field. By pursuing to limit women's access to family limitation it was easier to "[keep] women securely in the home at a time when increasing numbers sought to enter the public sphere" (Freedman 207). By making sure women would remain in the private sphere it would be easier for men to remain in power.

Some women also used sexual ideologies as a way to forward their cause. For example, many feminist historians argue that women who accepted the idea of female passionlessness did so in order to "elevate women closer to moral equality with men" (Freedman 208), or even their moral superiority (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 13). Feminists also saw women's right to say no to sex, a right that only became commonly accepted in the nineteenth century, as an important stepping stone in achieving female control over reproduction (Freedman 208). However, many feminist historians believe that although women gained some power by using these ideologies for their own benefit, they did so at the cost of conforming to a "'rigid and antisexual moral code' that required a loss of sexual self-assertion" (209). As such, these women would both benefit and suffer from adopting these assumptions of higher moral status.

Moreover, there are plenty of double standards in nineteenth-century sexual ideologies. For example, the demand for female purity did not apply to men in a similar manner. There are many studies that suggest that men engaged in premarital sex and extramarital affairs, typically with prostitutes (Freedman 199). These prostitutes were working class women who, "as prostitutes, safeguarded the ideal of purity in the middle class family" (205), thus displaying another double standard, that of class differences.

One key double standard in Victorian sexuality is the "myth of two women": virtuous and fallen. Women who had failed to follow the norms of sexual conduct, for example by having children outside marriage or having an extramarital affair, would be categorized as "fallen". This label would cover many types of misbehaviour, as "From the twentieth-century perspective there is a difference, and a distinctive one, between a prostitute and a girl who makes one mistake. An element of Victorian society did not allow for such a distinction" (Watt 2). A fallen woman would be a second class citizen from thereon: "the fallen woman had no power to

assert herself; she had few rights, if any" (6). This harsh treatment of "fallen" women emphasizes how serious the consequences of the sexual double standards could be in this time period. Although the dichotomy of virtuous and fallen women was most prevalent in British rhetoric, fallen women were a frequently used topic in American fiction in the nineteenth century. More on fallen woman fiction in chapter 2.2.

Also within the realm of sexuality, tensions were rising towards the end of the century. Claims that reproduction was the sole purpose of all sexual activity were already being questioned in the nineteenth century, but concrete support for this separation would only appear in the twentieth century (Freedman 210). Karen Lystra also argues that there was "an increasing tilt (not a complete revolution) in the view of female sexuality away from something a woman's father owned, and then her husband, toward something that only she 'possessed'" (81). Women were slowly taking charge of their own sexuality and the opportunities that doing so provided them with.

The dissatisfaction with the contemporary sexual politics is a central topic in Chopin's fiction. By being unfaithful to their husbands, the wives in "The Storm" (1898) and *The Awakening* are breaking the social expectations of sexual purity and submissiveness to one's husband, thus establishing their own sexual autonomy. In this context the sexuality of these female characters is by no means connected to aims of reproduction, but rather love connections and enjoyment. By doing this, they question the idea of female passionlessness, double standards of the time, and take their sexuality, along with their overall right to self-assertion, in their own hands. Sexuality and the power relations behind it were thus in a key position in Chopin's feminist message.

2.2 Previous literary tradition: scribbling women and double standards

In addition to the social situation discussed above, the prevailing literary traditions of Chopin's time can in part explain what exactly made *The Awakening* so shocking to her contemporaries. By taking a look at the literary norms and conventions that she

was defying, her poor reception can be understood. In this section I will first take a look at typical women's writing in nineteenth-century America labelled "the sentimentalist novel", and how Chopin's writing does not fit this category. Then in the two following chapters I will look at the two central types of female characters typical for the time period, namely virtuous and fallen women, and how fallen, sexually deviant, female characters were customarily punished for their misconduct.

2.2.1 Women's writing in the 19th century

The male-dominated nineteenth-century society was both portrayed and reinforced in literature, not only by male authors but also by women. Women and men did not only have separate spheres of life, they also had separate literary canons. As Elaine Showalter points out, women's "sentimental" writing or "literary domesticity" was countered with "men's artistic fraternity", that excluded female writers ("Tradition and the Female Talent" 11). Female writers typically considered being an author "a profession rather than a calling" (11), and had more moral than aesthetic motives in their writing. According to Showalter, female authors would only begin to think of themselves as artists in the 1870s and after (11).

Elaine Showalter has done extensive research on both British and American women's writing. In *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991), she takes a close look at the history and development of women's writing in the U.S. through discussing some major works from different periods. She also presents many of the same ideas and claims in her article "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book" (2007). Although Chopin's *The Awakening* is one of the books through which Showalter discusses traditions and conventions in women's writing, according to her it is a "solitary", nonconformist book that does not represent its time period, but was instead ground-breaking both thematically and stylistically (*Sister's Choice* 65). Showalter argues that *The Awakening* is "the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman" (65). This naturally implies that what female writers before Chopin were writing was drastically different when it comes to aesthetics and style.

The representatives of sentimentalist fiction celebrated matriarchal institutions in their works, idealizing the bonds between mother and child ("Tradition and the Female Talent" 10). Female sexuality was mostly absent, as "their most intense representation of female sexual pleasure was not in terms of heterosexual romance, but rather the holding or suckling of a baby" (10). Thus, the thematic difference between Chopin's works and the sentimentalists could not be greater, as Chopin often discusses motherhood and the feminine sphere in an explicitly critical manner, while also including more openly sexual content.

Showalter highlights the significance of nineteenth-century women's culture and its influence on women's writing. Close bonds between women of all ages were essential in nineteenth-century women's culture, as discussed by Smith-Rosenberg in her article "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" (1975). This "world of love and ritual" is characterized by frequent manifestations of affection, often physical, as well as women turning to each other, rather than men, with their personal worries. Showalter claims that *The Awakening* turns away from this women's culture in multiple ways. First of all, through stylistically and thematically turning away from typical women's writing, and typical female characters, but also on the plot level as Edna turns away from women's culture, first to the unconventional female artist Mademoiselle Reisz, and later into solitude ("Tradition and the Female Talent" 15-19).

The ideals and values of Victorian womanhood were "sustained, reinforced, and circulated through sentimental fiction" (13), so by women themselves. Showalter lists writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner and E.D.E.N Southworth as some of the sentimentalists of the 1850s and 60s whose works pictured the ideals of women's culture, through topics like motherhood and intimate female relationships (13-14). Also many of the stylistic choices were retrieved from the private sphere, as domestic elements such as "the kitchen, with its worn rocking chair; the Edenic mother's garden, with its fragrant female flowers and energetic male bees; the caged songbird, which represents the creative woman in her domestic sphere" (14) were frequently appearing motifs.

Although women's writing was even more commercially successful than that of men's, female authors struggled to be taken seriously by male critics. In Victorian

England many female writers chose to write anonymously or under a pseudonym in order to be taken seriously when writing about conventionally "masculine" topics (Easley 17), and to escape the constraints of the narrowly defined feminine literary tradition (18). Mary Evans, for example, used the male name George Eliot, and all three Brontë sisters adopted male names when first seeking a publisher (17-18).

By the 1850s, the majority of American best-selling fiction was written by female authors, but they were merely "deplored as a popular dilution of a truly virile American art" (*Sister's Choice* 12). A famous quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne from 1855 sums up the contemporary men's attitudes towards women's writing: "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash'" (*Sister's Choice* 12). It is important to take into account that the majority of the backlash that *The Awakening* received immediately after its publication came from male critics and readers in power, who were not ready to accept such a norm-defying book, especially written by a woman.

However, in this area as well, change was starting to take place by the end of the nineteenth century. Women's culture, as well as "the sentimental novel" were under attack, as New Woman writers among other revisionists began to discuss very different themes and topics than their predecessors.

2.2.2 Female characters – virtuous and fallen

As mentioned above, one of the most visible manifestations of the nineteenth-century double standards is the twofold division into virtuous and fallen women. This divide was a repeating topic in Victorian literature, as female characters were typically presented as archetypes of one extreme or the other throughout the nineteenth century (Watt 3). This over-simplified way in which female characters were depicted by all the mainstream authors, published and critiqued by men in power, contributed to the understanding of how gender roles are, and should be.

The terms “virtuous” and “fallen” are just one example of the “eternal types” that were invented by male artists and imposed on female characters (Gilbert and Gubar 17). A similar dichotomy has been discussed through multiple other word choices as well, such as “the angel and the monster” in Gilbert and Gubar’s influential book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979). In cultural and literary studies the additional terms “Madonna”/“whore” or “good girl”/“bad girl” are frequently used. The fundamental implications of the two-fold division remain the same. For the purposes of this study I have chosen to specifically focus on the term “fallen”, as it is the one that is most commonly used in connection to the adulteress characters typical to the nineteenth century.

Gilbert and Gubar discuss the virtuous nineteenth-century female character as “the angel in the house”. This idealised archetype of a woman is characterised by virginal purity and selflessness (21). The angel has no story of her own, but dedicates her entire being to the wellbeing of others, typically as a wife and mother who lives purely to satisfy the needs of her husband and children. The angel would not only be portrayed in fiction, but also in works of non-fiction such as guide books, “enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, self-lessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic” (23). Through this example the connection between the archetypes and their didactic aims becomes more apparent.

Gilbert and Gubar offer multiple examples of “angels” in literature, starting as early as the Middle Ages, with the idealized character of the Virgin Mary (20). From then on they continue to discuss the different forms the angel archetype has taken in classic works by authors such as Milton and Goethe, as well as many female writers. The term itself originates from Coventry Patmore’s 1862 narrative poem, *The Angel in the House*, which was extremely popular at the time of its publishing (22). Patmore’s Honoria possesses all the ideal characteristics of a Victorian woman, with her “unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity and nobility” (22). Most importantly, Honoria’s good qualities make not her, but her husband, successful, as she simply has no story of her own.

In Chopin’s works some archetypes of angels can be found, although they are rarely the protagonists. In *The Awakening*, for example, Edna’s close friend Adele

Ratignolle represents the archetype. She devotes herself to her husband and her children and does so with joy. Although Adele is presented as a character that genuinely enjoys her place in the society, Edna cannot do the same, and turns away from the ideals that her friend represents.

The angel's opposite, the monster, is not passive but active, and not submissive but assertive and even aggressive. Such "male characteristics" become monstrous in female characters, as they are "unfeminine" (28). These characteristics in women are represented as demonic and vicious. One example of a "monster" character in Chopin's writing is Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*. She does not conform to the society's expectations, has not married, but instead expresses herself through her music. Despite being recognised for her talent as a pianist, the general opinion people have of Reisz is one of an unpleasant, objectionable woman. Although Edna finds comfort in her company and is touched by her music, she is also aware of her undesirable position in the society, and has mixed feelings about her. I will explore Edna and Reisz's complicated relationship in more detail in section 3.2.2.

Although not all "monsters" are presented as primarily sexual beings, some "male" characteristics of a monstrous woman can also be applied to a fallen woman. As a woman that has broken the rules of the strict Victorian moral codes, the fallen woman has become active instead of passive, stepping into the male sphere of sexuality.

In the virtuous/fallen divide the focus of the objectionable qualities of the fallen woman are indeed specifically caused by her failure to comply with the society's asexual expectations. There were many possible reasons for which a woman could be labelled fallen, some of the typical causes being extra- or premarital sex. In Chopin's writing, both Edna in *The Awakening* and Calixta in "The Storm" are sexually active outside their marriages, and thus can be labelled 'fallen women', even though Chopin's treatment of them does not follow the norm.

Adultery itself has been such a central topic in both European and American literature that the French critic Denis de Rougemont went in 1939 so far as to say that "To go by literature, adultery would seem to be the most notable occupation of both Europe and America. Few are the novels that fail to allude to it" (qtd. in Fiedler

55). As such a popular topic, the roles of the characters involved were often very similar. Such archetypes as "The heroic figure of the seducer, the pathetic figure of the seduced, and the comic figure of the deceived husband" were employed (Fiedler 55). Women, who would become fallen women, were often portrayed as the victims of seduction. What is implied by this setting, is "a belief in the weakness of women in the hands of men" (70). Fiedler further states that this setting does not evoke the same emotions in the readers of his time of writing (1960), by saying that "'sexual emancipation' has made it hard for us to share the pity and horror with which a whole society once contemplated the Fallen Woman" (70).

Hence, the fallen woman was often presented as a victim of some sort. Still, the treatment of one would typically not be very sympathetic. One descriptive example in American literature is Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Hester is publicly shamed and condemned because she has given birth to a daughter, despite the fact that her husband has been out of town for a long time. After her shame is publicly announced and she takes her punishment of standing on a stage for everyone to see and judge, she is further obligated to wear a large scarlet letter "A" (for adulteress) on the breast of her clothing, as a sign of her crime, until her death. This form of punishment clearly symbolises the permanence of the label of a fallen woman. Although the novel often takes quite a sympathetic approach to Hester, and says that many townspeople eventually wished to remove the letter, Hester remains in her solitude, removed from the society, with the letter on her chest until the novel's end.

Another story of a fallen woman that is most frequently discussed in connection with Chopin's *The Awakening*, is Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). Critics all the way from Per Seyersted, who first brought Chopin's writing back in the limelight in the 1960s, have seen the influence of Flaubert's writing in Chopin's works (Seyersted 86). There certainly seems to be an academic consensus on the fact that Chopin had read *Madame Bovary*, despite the lack of concrete evidence.

There are without doubt multiple significant similarities between the novels. Both tell the story of a discontented wife, who is tired of being limited to the private sphere, with a husband that has proven to be dissatisfactory. There are many similarities in plot, as for example Emma burns her wedding bouquet, and Edna tries

to destroy her ring by stepping on it. Both Emma and Edna search for something more in life, eventually through extramarital affairs. In both stories the initial target of the women's affections – a younger man – flees the situation before anything drastic happens. Saddened by the turn of the events, both Edna and Emma have other affairs, with men who are known to seduce multiple women (Alcée Arobin in *The Awakening* and Rodolphe in *Madame Bovary*). Later the initial love interests return, and the relationships are continued.

Although both Emma and Edna can be labelled as fallen women, there are significant differences in their portrayals. Emma has been seen as materialistic and narcissistic (Gentry 7), so her general portrayal is much more negative than that of the strong, creative woman, Edna, who is much more successful in establishing a new, independent life than Emma is. Emma's behaviour is often portrayed as immoral, for example as she pushes her child over in anger, causing her to get a cut on her cheek (*Madame Bovary* 173), or lying and plotting against her husband, ruining both of their finances. The difference is immense in comparison with Chopin's nearly triumphant portrayal of Edna's multiple awakenings. Furthermore, as Emma first succumbs to temptation, she is portrayed as a victim of seduction, a weak woman in the hands of a powerful man. Emma resists Rodolphe's advances multiple times, but finally as he continues to push, she "surrenders" (173). As for *The Awakening*, Edna is an active subject, rather than a passive object, as she actively pursues Robert's company, and is in charge of when she allows Alcée to visit her. There are so many similarities, but also so many differences between the books that *The Awakening* has been seen as a revisionary version of *Madame Bovary*, even as "an American *Madame Bovary*" (Seyersted 138).

As mentioned above, the virtuous/fallen dichotomy is still, in different forms, present in contemporary attitudes and culture. The two opposing character types of "good girl" and "bad girl" are still frequently discussed in feminist literary criticism. A "good girl", like a virtuous Victorian woman, is still characterized by passivity and in a sexual context merely discussed as a victim, whereas a "bad girl", expressing her own sexual desire is often portrayed as "threatening, deviant, and bad" (Tolman and Higgins 205). As Katie J. Hogan states, "The empty and simplistic good-girl/bad-girl dichotomy … [is] the product of centuries of religious, legal, and social institutions

and values" (75). Thus, the virtuous/fallen divide has managed to remain in existence, through different forms and stereotypical characterisations.

2.2.3 The inevitable tragic endings of fallen women

The oppressive way in which "fallen" females were portrayed was also present in the stories' endings, as the fallen female characters were typically severely punished, often by death. Gail Godwin visualizes what she calls "Emma Bovary syndrome" in her novel *The Odd Woman* (1974), claiming that by looking at literary history one will find a "literature's graveyard positively choked with women … who 'get in trouble' (commit adultery, have sex without marriage, think of committing adultery or having sex without marriage) and thus, according to the literary convention of the time, must die" (qtd. in Leonard). Godwin, as an author with feminist concerns, recognized the extent to which all stories about sex outside marriage had to end tragically, by punishing the female that broke the rules. This tendency is evident in many classics from the nineteenth century, such as *Anna Karenina* (1875-1877) and *Madame Bovary*, as "death was the inevitable result of a woman's quest for life beyond the bourgeois sphere (which invariably took the form of a love affair – the only stab of independence available to most women)" (Leonard).

Although some authors attempted to defy this unwritten rule, it proved to be a difficult task. Tom Winnifrith examines the phenomenon in nineteenth-century England in his book *Fallen Women in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1994):

> The condemnation of fallen women … appears at first sight to be shared by almost every nineteenth-century writer of any stature. Austen, except in *Mansfield Park*, is relatively kind to female sinners at the beginning of the century, and Hardy tried to be kind at the end, but like Gaskell and even Trollope he found it difficult. [Hardy's] Tess and Gaskell's Ruth join Hetty Sorrel and Lady Isabel in expiating their sin with death. (5)

This shows the difficulty of defying such widely spread literary conventions, as well as the scope of the phenomenon, as "almost every nineteenth-century writer" made

the choice of condemning women who broke the rules, and even the ones that resisted the convention were merely "relatively kind" or found it difficult. Winnifrith goes on to discuss in depth the double standards that were involved in the fact that many of the most famous authors of this period (e.g. Hardy, Dickens, Eliot and Thackeray) had controversial private lives themselves, but still continued the harsh treatment of their characters that did similar deeds (7).

The question of punishments and tragic endings for male rule-breakers is complicated, but certainly less commonly addressed than the punishments of fallen women. Male characters often flee the situation, thus experiencing no consequences whatsoever, like Léon and Rodolphe in *Madame Bovary*, as well as Robert and Alcée Arobin in *The Awakening*. The typical pattern being that of a married woman getting involved with an unmarried man in an extramarital affair, the crime of the woman deceiving her husband has been punished much more seriously than the crime of seduction by the men. In some cases, however, the situation is less clear. In *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, the male rule-breaker dies in the end, as a result of punishing himself due to his feelings of guilt, as well as the acts of the malicious husband of the woman he had an affair with. However, the "fallen" minister fails to take responsibility for the act for years, while Hester is suffering the social exclusion, while protecting him by not giving away his identity. *The Scarlet Letter* being an exception, most male perpetrators avoid punishment simply by not getting caught, or as the offense is not seen as equally serious.

Elaine Ginsberg discusses the double standard of treating experimenting male and female characters differently through different canons of initiation stories. For young male characters, there are many different types of initiation experiences, often leading to them gaining a degree of self-awareness, or at least beginning that process (29). These are stories of at least some level of character development, and although the loss of innocence might be sad or painful, it is seldom regrettable (30). The same does not apply to female characters, especially not in the nineteenth century. Stories of female initiation are first of all much more difficult to find, as "women, as they have been traditionally depicted in American literature, are presumed to need no knowledge of the world" (27). Consequently, when a female character does lose some of her innocence, it is not a positive improvement:

> For the young girl who becomes an initiate, however, the loss of innocence and acquisition of knowledge are all too often regrettable. This is especially true in what are perhaps the first American novels with what might be considered an initiation motif: the early sentimental novels which have the seduction of a young woman as a theme. In these novels the significant knowledge which the young girl acquires seems to be that all men are determined to win her virginity but, if she loses that, she loses everything of importance in life. (Ginsberg 30)

Through this example, it is made clear that female experimentation and the subsequent loss of innocence are a punishable act compared to the male initiation that leads to an improved self-awareness, and improved character. As child-like innocence was seen as a virtue in women, the loss of that innocence was a punishable act. Ginsberg goes on to argue that once a female has gone through this initiation and reached this level of self-awareness, she is portrayed as an outcast, a fallen woman (27-28). These different canons of initiation stories clearly encourage male experimentation, while condemning its female equivalent, explaining the ideology behind fallen women's punishments and equally guilty men's acquittal.

Although in the above-mentioned American classic, *The Scarlet Letter*, the fallen woman Hester Prynne is severely punished, she still manages to avoid death until the end of the novel. Still, many famous American examples of fallen women punished by death can be found. For example young Maggie, who is accused of having premarital sex in Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893), ends up first roaming the streets of New York as a prostitute, but is also found dead at the end of the novel. The death of the (alleged) female rule-breaker seems inevitable, so in a way the ending of Chopin's *The Awakening* does conform to the contemporary conventions. However, in my reading, Edna's death is not a punishment for her actions, but rather the only possible choice she had, and a last act of defiant independence. Still, the death of the adulteress made the story publishable, as a happy ending like the one in "The Storm" would have been completely unacceptable to the contemporary literary critics, who were used to the norm of tragic endings for stories on adultery.

The link between *The Awakening* and *Madame Bovary* is again essential, as in both works the female protagonist ends up committing suicide. Despite this further

parallel plot development, the stories are again fundamentally different. Emma's more negative portrayal, leading up to her degrading condition and eventual suicide by eating poison is presented as a cautionary example. Emma is depicted as a foolish young woman "whose adultery made her into a kind of monster to spook generations of women and critically damage their concept of self" (Beth Bassein qtd. in Gentry 7). In comparison with Edna, Emma is portrayed as naïve and confused, her head filled with romantic stories in a Don Quixote type of manner, like a more traditional victim of seduction. Edna on the other hand takes her faith in her own hands, and her death, although tragic, cannot be seen as a cautionary tale or a warning.

Certainly the simple fact that both women end up taking their own lives does not imply that the stories should be interpreted in a similar manner. Suicides in literature have been a frequently employed theme and topic for centuries, and can signify multiple things. Deborah S. Gentry discusses multiple potential meanings behind women's literary suicides in her book *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath* (2006). The first example she offers in her introduction is suicide as a choice of free will, as a "symbolic act of defiance or protest against tyranny or immorality" (2), a thematic element found already in Greek tragedies. In the eighteenth century, however, suicide would begin to be seen as an involuntary result of weakness and mental instability (2). During the nineteenth century this development continued to be applied mostly to female characters, whose suicides were caused by "love, passive self-surrender, and illness" (Margaret Higonnet qtd. in Gentry 2). By using Gilbert and Gubar's angel and monster dichotomy, Gentry identifies one other major reasoning, a woman's escape from the impossible constraints of a patriarchal society (4). This is the reasoning Gentry applies to Chopin's *The Awakening*.

Certainly in the case of a fallen woman, death would often be the only possible option. As Nina Auerbach states in her essay "The Rise of the Fallen Woman" (1980):

> Though in life the division between fallen and respectable woman might have been reasonably fluid, art allows no return to the old familial boundaries of identity. Conventionally, the fallen woman must die at the end of her story, perhaps because death rather than marriage is the one implacable human

> change, the only honorable symbol of her fall's transforming power. Death does not simply punish or obliterate the fallen woman: its ritual appearance alone does her justice. (34-35)

Auerbach approaches the inevitable deaths of fallen women from a ritualistic point of view. As the label of a fallen woman has taken over her entire identity, there can be no return to normality. Therefore, death alone is an adequate representation of the irreversibility of the fallen woman's status, her permanent exclusion from society.

Therefore, the most important feature that makes Chopin's "The Storm" her most revolutionary work is its ending. It does not follow the conventions of the "fallen" woman dying, or at least being otherwise severely punished, at the end of the story. I will discuss the significance of the deaths at the end of *The Awakening* and "The Story of an Hour", as well as the lack of a tragic ending in "The Storm" in detail in the analysis chapters.

2.3 The New Women

As the turn of the century approached, the changing attitudes on women's rights and their position in society were taken to action. The struggle for women's rights during this period has been labelled first wave feminism, in America typically understood as the period between the Seneca Falls Woman's Right Convention of 1848 and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, as women were given the vote in every state (Hewitt 3). The vote has typically been seen as the main, or even sole, target of the early women's movement, although this approach has also been critiqued as too narrow (3). The Seneca Falls convention was certainly not the first time concerns for women's rights were voiced, as pioneering feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft in England, had already made many ground-breaking demands for gender equality in the late eighteenth century (Richardson and Willis 1). However, it was certainly a turning point, accelerating change in the United States.

Within this broader movement rose another, both social and literary movement, called the New Woman. The term New Woman was taken into popular use from

Sarah Grand's 1894 article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" (Richardson and Willis 10), but the New Woman was reflected in literature and attitudes already in the 1880s, and the major works fall between the 1880s and 1910 (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction* 4). It was quick to gain popularity in Europe and the United States, as more and more women began to question their inferior social position (Richardson and Willis 1). Central concerns of the movement included equal opportunities in education and the workforce, and overall rights in the society, such as the vote and the right to personal possessions. The women described as New Women were not merely adapting to the wide social changes that were taking place at the time, but autonomously recreating their role as women, according to their own agenda (12).

This ideology was expressed in multiple ways in women's daily lives, from unconventional dress to unusual behaviour. Progressive fashion choices were typical for New Women, as their "rational dress" included unfeminine garments such as pants (13). Other characteristic, not traditionally feminine attributes typical for fictional as well as real New Women were for example bicycling and smoking cigarettes (22). These characteristics were widely ridiculed in magazines through caricatures by the movement's opponents, who saw New Women both as ridiculous, as well as a threat to men's position (13). The New Woman became a cultural stereotype, a "journalistic myth", which "simplified and satirized the New Woman's real concerns over social and moral issues" (24).

Despite the mixed reactions, as a literary movement the New Woman spread so quickly that between 1883 and 1900 over a hundred New Woman novels were written (Richardson and Willis 1). According to Ann Heilmann, "New Woman fiction was more than a literary response to the social changes brought about by the Victorian women's movement: it constituted, and conceived itself as, an agent of social and political transformation" (*New Woman Fiction* 4). She bases this claim on the fact that many New Woman writers were also actively involved in the women's movement, and organizations that worked for political issues such as women's suffrage (4). Fiction was seen as a powerful way to bring debates on femininity to a larger audience, and many New Woman novels were indeed strongly and openly didactic (Richardson and Willis 24).

However, like any widely spread social movement, the New Woman had conflicting opinions among its supporters. As Richardson and Willis point out, the late nineteenth-century female activist "agitated on diverse and sometimes mutually contradictory reforms: changes in the marriage laws, free love, pre-marital chastity, free access to contraception" (28) to mention a few. Some writers remained more conservative, defending marriage as an institution that created a safe position for women, whereas more liberal thinkers promoted free love and ending marriages altogether (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction* 109). Thus, personal relationships between women and men were central to discussion. As a consequence, New Woman novels battled multiple controversial issues, from heroines refusing to consummate their marriages (Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*) to having children outside marriage (Allen's *The Woman Who Did*) (Richardson and Willis 24). The focus on marital and sexual affairs suggests that New Woman writers were fully aware of the fact that the source of oppression was also present inside the home, not merely in legal injustices, such as the lack of the vote. The fictional New Woman, created by writers like Grand, was created as a way to advance social and sexual change (24).

As female sexuality was still largely controlled by men (access to birth control/abortion, wife's duty to her husband), questions regarding the sexual domain were addressed in particularly radical ways. Female sexuality, previously considered non-existent or taboo, was celebrated in a new way, and the sexually passive portrayals of the Victorian woman were overthrown by a belief that women's sexual passions were equal to those of men (Lavender 3). Furthermore, economic freedom was thought to go hand in hand with sexual freedom, so sex outside marriage was seen as "behavioural outlawry that appealed to New Feminists' desires to overturn conventionality" (3). This mind-set is clearly visible in *The Awakening*, as Edna breaks away from the role she no longer wants to conform to through extra-marital affairs, while simultaneously pursuing economic independence. By breaking the rules in fiction, New Woman writers as well as Chopin could determine their own set of rules, aiming for independence and sexual autonomy outside the realm of fiction as well.

Despite the popularity of the movement, only a small minority of women committed to overt feminism because of the widely hostile attitudes. However, a much larger number of women supported the further availability of birth control and other related issues (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 339). Although Chopin herself was not politically active or a self-proclaimed feminist, she wrote her major works during the New Woman period, and her writing involves many of the central themes and topics for the movement. Even her personality and behaviour, dressing extravagantly, smoking, and having an affair with a married man (Toth, *Unveiling* 97) fit the archetype of a New Woman. Despite not overtly identifying as a feminist or a New Woman writer, Chopin's major works have since their re-emergence been celebrated by feminists worldwide (243).

Overall, toward the end of the century, societal progress was accelerating, as for example the numbers of female students in higher education were slowly increasing (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 341), and the work towards obtaining the vote was showing progress. First wave feminism and the New Woman cleared the path for future movements and demands, and the continued interest in writers like Chopin shows that many of the issues they dealt with in their works are still relevant and interesting to contemporary readers.

3 Chopin's works

Many of the aforementioned issues are addressed either directly or indirectly in Chopin's fiction. The unhappy wives in "The Story of an Hour" and *The Awakening* point out the need for change in the relationships between husbands and wives, whereas the unfaithful wives in *The Awakening* and "The Storm" go against the conventional characteristics of a housewife, challenging the expectations of asexual women and submissive wives.

3.1 "The Story of an Hour": Louise, an unhappy wife

"The Story of an Hour", as its title suggests, recounts the events of a single hour in the life of Louise Mallard, a young married woman. Louise, known to suffer from heart trouble, is carefully given the news of her husband's tragic passing in a railroad accident. It is immediately evident that Louise's reaction is not what would be expected in such circumstances, as she "did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with paralyzed inability to accept is significance" (756). Instead, the further descriptions of Louise's emotions as she withdraws to her room by herself and begins to imagine her future as a widow, are closer to ecstatic joy than the expected reaction of grief and sorrow.

Louise sits by an open window, looking at the scenery of springtime nature. As she calms down after the initial shock of the news, some powerful change is beginning to take place within her, initially intimidating her. She tries to resist it, but the whisper "free, free, free" (757) escapes her lips nonetheless. Although Louise knows that she will be saddened by the sight of her husband's dead body, she looks with pleasurable anticipation into the future after that moment, and all the years coming that would "belong to her absolutely" (757). She is excited by the thought of independence and not having to tend to her husband's needs instead of her own, summed up by her further whisper "Free! Body and soul free!" (757). With this newfound thirst for life she exits the room with "a feverish triumph in her eyes" (758). As she goes downstairs with her sister, she is met with an unexpected sight, her husband Brently Mallard standing there unharmed, not having been even close to the scene of the accident. The story ends with the information of Louise's sudden death at the sight of her husband, ironically deemed by doctors to be the result of the aforementioned heart trouble combined with being overjoyed by his surprise appearance.

The central point of the story is that Louise is unhappy with her situation as a married woman. Even her outer appearance shows the signs of her inferior status, as her face is described as young, with lines that "bespoke repression" (756). The later descriptions of Louise's joyful thoughts of life as a widow alone prove her

dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, most importantly with having to devote herself to someone else's needs rather than her own.

Despite Louise being unhappily married, her husband's personality or behaviour as such are not the source of her discontentment. In fact, Louise admits that Brently's face "had never looked save with love upon her", and describes his hands as kind and tender (757). Since Brently is not a particularly bad husband, for example by being violent or cruel, Chopin does not aim to demonise men, but to show that even a marriage to a kind and loving husband like Brently can place an unbearable burden on the wife. Thus, the story does not intend to discuss simply one case of unhappy marriage, but has a wider, more symbolic meaning. This wider meaning brings forth a criticism aimed at marriage as a whole, as an institution that has strong negative effects on women.

This effect is described by Louise through her description of her husband's less ideal qualities. She thinks that Brently possessed a "powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature" (757). This statement illustrates Louise's thoughts on marriage as an institution of repression, limiting the possibilities of both the wife and the husband. By making a broad statement referring to men and women in general, Louise comments on the nature of marriages in general, not just her own. The term "blind persistence" highlights how unconsciously people are following traditions, despite their harmful consequences. She goes on to describe this repression by stating that "A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime" (757). Thus, although she does not think of her husband as an intentionally cruel character, the act, marriage with its limitations, is still a crime in her mind. And although Louise recognises that she had "loved him – sometimes" (757), it now becomes secondary in comparison with her newfound independence: "What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!" (757). Love, a mysterious concept to her, is deemed irrelevant in the face of her self-assertion that she now welcomes with joy.

Louise's discontentment with her married life also involves a bodily dimension, suggested by the fact that her whisper "Free! Body and soul free!" (757) also

includes the word “body”. Thus, her newfound freedom also includes her right to control her own body, with obvious sexual implications, as she no longer needs to comply with a wife’s duties to her husband.

As she is finally freed from her duties, she is quick to see the positive side of the events. The major part of the story consists of descriptions of Louise’s inner turmoil, as she begins to think of her life after her husband’s death. As Louise is given privacy to deal with the news, she is quick to recover. In her room she sits by an open window, with a view of the “new spring life” (756). The air is described as having a “delicious breath of rain” (756) and she can hear a song sung in the distance, as well as countless birds singing nearby. There are patches of blue sky showing through the clouds that she fixes her eyes on. The description is far more joyful than what one might expect from the circumstances, and especially the imagery of springtime, with its associations of a fresh start, brings the notion of new, positive changes coming for Louise. She focuses on the blue sky, as she starts to accept the fact that her life is about to take a turn for the better.

Her thoughts are surrounded around the idea of independence, “a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely” (757). The lack of a husband to serve excites her, as “There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself” (757). Her excitement is further emphasised in this passage:

> Her fancy was running riot along those day ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long. (758)

Instead of feeling what would be expected of her, loss and sorrow, this newly-widowed woman is overwhelmed with a sense of freedom. She can now finally live for herself, and not for her husband, after a long time of being defined by her position as a wife. She finds a new joy for life that she seemed to have been missing earlier.

This yearning for independence is caused by the earlier expectations for her to act like the virtuous and selfless “angel in the house”, hiding herself to serve the needs

of others. Now, instead, she is dropping the burden of having to tend to others and fit into the role of a housewife. In a manner very similarly to Edna in *The Awakening*, Louise is yearning for a life of her own, without having to dedicate her entire being to her role as a wife.

Louise reacts to these new exciting possibilities very physically, first as her "bosom rose and fell tumultuously" (757), as these new ideas "possess" (757) her. Later "Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body" (757). The fact that her reactions to these new possibilities are not simply expressed through her thoughts, but also bodily reactions, confirms the physical dimension of the issues involved, such as the problematic relationship between self-assertion and the duty to one's husband.

This physical reaction comes to a dramatic end when Louise dies at the end of the story. The ending is clearly ironic, as Louise's death is said to be caused by joy as she sees her husband again, despite the previous detailed descriptions of her joyous welcoming of life without him. This irony brings the story to a full circle, ending with a reference to the heart trouble Louise is said to struggle from, mentioned in the very first sentence of the story. This ironic ending can be interpreted in multiple ways.

One possible interpretation would be that Louise's sudden death is a punishment for her misbehaviour, following the pattern of disobedient women ending up dead at the end of many nineteenth-century works. Even though Louise is not unfaithful to her husband, like Edna in *The Awakening*, and Calixta in "The Storm", her unconventionally celebratory reception of the news of her husband's death could make her be seen as a bad, vicious wife. Some critics, such as Lawrence I. Berkove, have argued for this reading, drawing evidence for example from the exaggerated expressions used of Louise's behaviour towards the end, especially the expressions of "feverish triumph in her eyes" and her "[carrying] herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" (758). Berkove interprets these expressions as evidence of Louise being selfish and delusional (157), leading up to her death due to her ill-advised and unrealistic expectations (158). However, a more likely reading is that Chopin, as an author who has herself experienced the new possibilities of independent life as a widow, as well as witnessed the similar story of her mother,

remains sympathetic to Louise's behaviour. These hyperbolic descriptions towards the end of the story are used to emphasise her high hopes, making the discovery that her husband is alive even more devastating for her. By making Louise fall from as high a joy as possible, as described by these expressions, her death in the end is more logically caused by the sudden disappointment of all her dreams coming to a sudden end.

The ending could also suggest the complete unattainability of Louise's new independent lifestyle. In the situation that she is in as a married woman, she could never attain the level of independence that she is yearning for. As her husband is not dead after all, she could only return to the state of repression she was so overjoyed to have escaped by chance. As divorce was not a viable alternative either, her dreams of such complete self-assertion that she dreams of are made impossible. However, as she has already made the discovery of self-assertion as the "strongest impulse of her being" (757), there can be no return to the previous circumstances, and the only possible outcome is her death. A similar reading of the protagonist's death as the inevitable outcome of no other possibilities can be made of the ending of *The Awakening*, discussed in chapter 3.2.

Another explanation for Louise's death is that it had to happen simply for the story to be publishable. Chopin had to end Louise's life instead of portraying a new happier and more successful life without the husband, not to shock her publishers and her audience. As mentioned in the introduction, much of the story resembles what happened to Chopin's mother, Eliza O'Flaherty. Yet, unlike Eliza's, Louise's happiness had to reach its tragic ending to adapt to the literary conventions of the time. As Emily Toth points out:

> Chopin had to disguise reality. She had to have her heroine die. A story in which an unhappy wife is suddenly widowed, becomes rich, and lives happily ever after – Eliza O'Flaherty's story – would have been much too radical, far too threatening, in the 1890s. There were limits to what editors would publish, and what audiences would accept. (*Unveiling* 10)

Chopin could not publish such a seemingly immoral story, but instead chose to have the husband "return from the dead" and have the wife die instead. By doing this she

creates a more ambiguous ending that could be interpreted in multiple ways. Despite the changes Chopin had to make to the real life equivalent of the story, "The Story of an Hour" has been typically interpreted as a feminist work, praising female self-assertion and criticizing the oppressive conditions created by unequal marriages.

Although a simple and short story, of only around a thousand words, "The Story of an Hour" still manages to make a strong impression. It is precisely the limited scope of the story that makes the case of Louise not an individual case of one unsatisfied wife, but gives the story a more general, symbolic nature.

3.2 *The Awakening*: Edna, unhappy and unfaithful

Despite its poor reception among Chopin's contemporaries, *The Awakening* has later become her best known and most celebrated work. It centres upon the character of Edna Pontellier, and her journey through a series of awakenings. In the beginning of the story Edna is spending the summer at Grand Isle, Louisiana, with her husband, Leonce Pontellier, and their two boys. She is defined by her position as Mrs. Pontellier, yet socialises more with her friends than her often absent husband. She is particularly fond of a charming younger man Robert Lebrun, and eventually the two develop romantic feelings for one another. Although they do not confess these feelings or act upon them while at Grand Isle, eventually the situation gets too fraught for Robert, who flees to Mexico. Edna is struck hard by Robert's sudden departure, and once she returns to the city begins to act unconventionally, abandoning her duties at home and pursuing a career as a painter instead. Despite being worried about his wife's strange behaviour, Mr. Pontellier goes on a longer than usual business trip to New York. The children are also away, as their grandmother takes them for a stay in the countryside. During this time Edna leaves the family home for a small house of her own, nicknamed the pigeon house, and celebrates the move with an extravagant dinner party. During this time she also becomes close to a young man with a bad reputation, Alcee Arobin. The two have an affair, which for Edna is solely a physical one, as she in unable to forget Robert. Soon, however, Robert returns from Mexico, and eventually the two end up

confessing their love. Edna is ecstatic, but has to leave him to support her friend who is giving birth. As she returns, she finds out that Robert has once again fled the situation. Devastated by his departure and his inability to understand that she is not owned by her husband but free to pursue a relationship with him, Edna decides to end her life. She returns to Grand Isle to drown herself.

3.2.1 Marriage – the cause of Edna's unhappiness

Edna describes her marriage to Leonce as "purely an accident" (16), further explaining her reasons for marrying him as follows:

> He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband. (16-17)

Ironically describing the marriage as an "accident", Edna's marriage resembles Chopin's own experience of how she ended up married to Oscar: "I dressed for my marriage – went to church and found myself married before I could think what I was doing" (Toth, *Unveiling* 55).

Edna's marriage to Leonce is a practical matter rather than a romantic bond: "As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams" (17). As Edna does not consider romance a realistic option, she has given up on the idea and focuses on the reality, her marriage. Edna even feels comfort in the fact that their relationship is not a passionate one, as it is then less unpredictable: "She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution" (17). She does not expect love and passion from marriage, but ends up later finding those things elsewhere.

In the beginning of the novel Edna is unhappy with her situation, although not yet able to say exactly why. She is portrayed inconsolably crying on the porch of the family's vacation home: "she went on crying there, not caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arms. She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life" (7). Although this is not unusual behaviour for her, she is still unaware of the exact cause of her unhappiness. However, it is already clearly linked to her married life, as the crying is said to be typical particularly in her "married life".

Even though Edna describes her husband as kind and devoted (7), his behaviour shows that he does not treat Edna as an equal partner, but more like one of his personal possessions. For instance, when Edna comes home after a swim, he is upset: "'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (4). His inability to treat Edna as his equal is evident in the way he treats her, often handing her commands rather than requests. For instance, when Edna refuses to join him inside late at night after a night of entertainment, Leonce is surprised and irritated: "'This is more than folly,' he blurted out. 'I can't permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly'" (27). He fails to see Edna as an equal partner, capable of taking care of herself, and instead rather gives her orders than an invitation.

However, Mr. Pontellier is, like Brently Mallard in "The Story of an Hour", not described as a simply evil character, as Edna admits that her husband has been kind to her and acts with "uniform devotion" (7). As a result, *The Awakening* is also targeting a wider issue than a single, abusive husband. Like in "The Story of an Hour", the main object of critique is marriage itself.

Despite being devoted to his wife, Leonce personifies all aspects of the prevailing ideas of marital duties. He, as the husband, is in charge of financially supporting his family, and spends most of his time at work. His wife should, according to him, give him and the children more attention: "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (6). He also expects her to take care of the household, entertain guests and keep up appearances to maintain good relationships

with people important to his business. When Edna fails to act as expected, trying to pursue a career as an artist, Leonce is disappointed specifically in her failure to fulfil her duties: “her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him” (48). He explains his thinking as follows: “It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family” (48). It is clear in this statement how Leonce justifies Edna’s limited possibilities in the public sphere by emphasising the power she possesses in the private sphere, and how she would be more useful there, following the idea that women would be more useful in the private sphere as an “angel in the house”.

It is obvious that according to Leonce, Edna does not fulfil the ideal qualities of a Victorian wife and mother, “pious, pure, domestic and submissive” (Lystra 122). In addition to the abovementioned inattention and neglect of her children, Leonce is also worried about her growing lack of submissiveness: “Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him” (48). She also spends too much time outside the home to his liking, especially after the family returns from Grand Isle, failing to remain domestic.

As the novel progresses, Edna clearly objects to the general idea of marriage. She, for example, refuses to go to her sister’s wedding, saying that “a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (56). Edna’s feelings are symbolised by her stepping on her wedding ring, in a scene that resembles the way Emma Bovary burns her wedding bouquet (*Madame Bovary* 81) (Jasenas 315). After Edna has started abandoning her duties at home and heard her husband’s consequent complaints, she retreats to her room: “taking off her wedding ring, [she] flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet” (45). Edna’s inability to make a dent on the ring symbolises her inability to escape the constraints of marriage, and the societal expectations that it entails.

3.2.2 Refusal to choose between angel and monster

Although Edna loves her children, there is something different about her as a mother, compared to the other mothers at Grand Isle. The difference, however, is not easily pointed out:

> It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or any one else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived, and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement.
>
> If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing. (8)

The difference between Edna and the other mothers is then explained through the description of "mother-women":

> In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (8)

The main characteristics of a mother-woman are angelic and selfless, clearly fitting the "angel in the house" image. Chopin even describes their protecting wings, and uses multiple expressions, such as "worshiped", "a holy privilege" and "ministering angels" that suggest how religiously these women are devoted to their duties.

The angelic mother-woman type is further personified by one of Edna's closest friends: "Many of them were delicious in the role [of a mother-woman]; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm … Her name was Adele Ratignolle" (8). In the novel, Adele is expecting her fourth child, and is fully devoted

to her family. Her relationship with her husband is described as simply perfect: “The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union” (47). Even Adele’s artistic talent, her music, is solely meant for the enjoyment of others: “She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (21).

Edna’s friendship with Adele helps her on her journey, as Adele’s charm and warmth help her relax and put down her guard. Adele is the first female that explicitly expresses her affection to Edna, as Edna has not received such attention from her mother or sisters (15-16).

> Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, “Pauvre cherie.”
>
> The action was at first a little confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole’s gentle caress. She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others. (15)

Adele, the perfect mother-woman that she is, has no problem putting her caring qualities to use in her friendship with Edna. With her, Edna feels her “first breath of freedom” (17).

However, despite the ideal marriage that the Ratignolles have, Edna does not envy Adele. This is made clear by her thoughts after leaving their house after a visit:

> Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, – a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in

> which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. (48)

Edna chooses the path of awakening and resistance, rather than the "blind contentment" of Adele. Having witnessed a "perfect" marriage, Edna is convinced it is not the life for her.

Still, Edna and Adele's relationship remains close. Adele is very curious about the pigeon house, naïvely wondering where would Edna's husband and children fit in there. She also warns Edna about Alcee, his bad reputation and how even his attention can "ruin a woman's name" (80). Despite her suspicions, Adele remains unaware of the extent of Edna's separation from her married life. Even at the end of the novel, despite her exhaustion after just giving birth, Adele still makes the effort to remind Edna of what she deems the most important thing in life: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (92).

Edna, however, has a very different relationship with her children:

> She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them. The year before they had spent part of the summer with their grandmother Pontellier in Iberville. Feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (17)

Having "blindly" assumed this responsibility, she was unaware of the full scope of the responsibilities brought about by children. She does not feel suitable to take on the role of a mother, and as such feels relieved when the children are away. They are, in fact, absent during the majority of the novel, playing a very minor role in Edna's life. Edna only visits them briefly in Iberville, where the boys are with Leonce's mother. Their reunion is joyful, as Edna has not seen the children for a long time: "How glad she was to see the children! She wept for very pleasure when she felt their little arms clasping her; their hard, ruddy cheeks pressed against her own glowing cheeks" (79). During this week Edna gives them "all of herself" (79),

echoing the selflessness of mother-women. Still, as she returns home, the impact of the visit wears off quickly: “All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul. She was again alone” (79).

This impulsive and inconsistent relationship is caused by Edna’s unwillingness to efface herself, like the mother-women.

> Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one. Then had followed a rather heated argument; the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language. Edna tried to appease her friend, to explain.
>
> “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.” (40-41)

Edna’s reluctance to give “herself” yet again echoes the need for an angelic mother to have no individual self. Edna is not ready to give up her own identity, creativity and freedom to serve others, even her own children.

As an opposite counterpart to the angelic mother-woman Adele, the story also includes a “monster” character, the unconventional musician, Mademoiselle Reisz. Reisz is described as a “disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarrelled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (22). Her strong will and self-assertion are considered unfeminine, undesirable qualities. Although she is given recognition over her musical abilities, the general public opinion seems rather uniform in finding her company disagreeable.

Descriptions of her appearance are equally unflattering, fitting the characteristics of a “monster”. She is for example described as appearing deformed when she is playing the piano: “She sat low at the instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity” (54). It is also stated that “She had absolutely no taste in dress and wore a batch of rusty black lace

with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair" (22). Most people ridicule her for the violets, but Edna is kind to her, and even sends her fresh violets to wear for her dinner party (72).

Despite having mixed feelings about Reisz' personality, Edna has a strong connection with her through music. Edna is as fond of listening to Reisz play as she is keen on playing for her. While still at Grand Isle, Edna has a strong emotional and physical response to Mademoiselle Reisz's music: "The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column … the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (23). Reisz notices her reaction, and is pleased, saying "You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!" (23).

Their relationship continues in the city, through music but also through the letters that Robert sends to Reisz, instead of Edna, as he thinks it impossible to actually pursue a married woman. Reisz is the only character in addition to Edna and Robert that seems to truly understand their feelings for one another. She serves as a messenger, allowing Edna to read Robert's letters at her house, although Robert does not know she sees his letters (67). Reisz knows, and states to Edna, that Robert writes his letters "because he loves you, poor fool, and is trying to forget you, since you are not free to listen to him or belong to him" (67). Reisz's acceptance of the illegitimate relationship, as well as her facilitating their communication, links her to the affair, as someone who is willing to go against societal norms. By having Edna and Robert reunite by chance in Reisz's apartment of all places, Chopin continues to connect the character of Reisz to rebellious, nonconformist behaviour. She embodies an unconventional woman, and as such a possible path for Edna to choose in life.

Edna, like Reisz, is interested in art, although Edna works with drawing and painting instead of music. In the beginning of the novel Edna's interest in art is described as a mere hobby, although one that she enjoys like no other: "Mrs. Pontellier had brought her sketching materials, which she sometimes dabbled with in an unprofessional way. She liked the dabbling. She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her" (11). As she becomes detached from her limiting role of a wife and a mother, her art takes a larger role. Later on in the story she claims to have

sold many of her works, and that her works are said to grow in "force and individuality" (67). Both women being creative, Reisz embodies the path that she could choose as a painter.

Like Edna's relationship with Adele, her relationship with Reisz helps her on her journey of self-discovery. She visits her for example when she wishes to relax: "There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (66). Edna feels she can confide in Reisz, as she is the first person Edna tells of her plans to move away to the pigeon house (66). She is also the first person that Edna admits being in love with Robert to (68).

Although other people do not think very highly of Reisz, Edna defends her. For example when Alcee states that he has heard Reisz is "partially demented" (69), Edna says that "She seems to me wonderfully sane" (70). Perhaps Edna feels sympathetic towards Reisz because she can see some similarities between her and herself, and her life-style as a potential future for herself. Reisz even explicitly warns Edna of the challenges of choosing an unconventional path in life, by first feeling her shoulder blades to see if her "wings were strong" (69), and further explaining that "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (69). Sadly, later a similar image is repeated in the final scene of the novel, as Edna sees how "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down to the water" (96), as she is about to drown herself.

Clearly dedicating oneself completely to art and individual expression does not come without consequences. For women, in the case of Reisz, the sacrifice seems to be the loss of femininity and being considered unpleasant company – as she is a secluded, solitary character, who most people seem to dislike. She has remained unmarried and openly expresses her dislike for children. Deborah S. Gentry argues that Reisz is "an artist who has sacrificed everything else in life for her individual talent", and "completely rejected for herself the traditional feminine role" (32). According to Gentry, Reisz is an unfeminine, nonsexual character, in opposition to Edna, who

although “rejects the traditional female role, she does not reject her sexuality but rather embraces it” (36), bringing her further apart from Reisz’s sole dedication to art.

Although Edna has a close relationship with both an “angel” and a “monster”, she eventually chooses neither path. Kathleen Lant argues that all the characters in *The Awakening* offer a path from which Edna can choose her own, but she refuses to do so, because none of the potential paths are enough. By taking on one of the roles, she would necessarily have to give up some part of herself that is vital to her (Gentry 31). Consequently, as Edna refuses to compromise and gives up all these “false selves”, she turns to solitude.

From the beginning of the novel, Edna is described as a character who is inclined to solitude. This tendency is shown in her choosing to read a popular book “in secret and solitude, though none of the others had done so” (10), and the general characterisation that “Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature. Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself” (13). Thus, choosing solitude is characteristic to Edna, a character trait that is further emphasised by the novel’s original title, *A Solitary Soul* (Koloski, “Kate Chopin: *The Awakening*”).

Edna’s status as an outsider and a “solitary soul”, is further emphasised by linguistic and ethnic differences. Edna, although she has married a Creole, is not one herself. Edna’s ethnic/cultural background is vaguely described as “an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution” (5). Consequently, unlike almost all the other islanders at the beginning of the novel, she cannot speak fluent French. This causes some problems in the generally bilingual community, and at times she is not fully aware of everything that is going on around her. There are also further cultural differences aside from the language though, as Adele points out to Robert that “She is not one of us; she is not like us” (18), as she explains that Edna is not as used to casual flirting or any type of shows of affection as the Creoles are. Edna is more prone to keep to herself, and is astonished by some of the conversations that are had openly in front of her, “She was growing accustomed to like shocks, but she could not keep the mounting color back from her cheeks” (10).

Towards the end of the story, Edna has clearly chosen that she wants to be left on her own. As Doctor Mandelet asks Edna about Leonce's plans for them to go abroad, Edna answers as follows: "no, I am not going. I'm not going to be forced into doing things. I don't want to go abroad. I want to be let alone" (93). In the very end, Edna also chooses not to seek any support from friends, but pursues her end on her own.

Edna's move to her own, small house, the pigeon house, symbolises her pursuit of solitude. She only takes one servant with her, in a house that would not be able to accommodate her husband and children, seeking to be left alone. Gentry discusses the pigeon house, and first, her atelier in the family home, as Edna's attempts to create a room of her own, drawing on Virginia Woolf's famous essay, "A Room of One's Own" (1929). According to Gentry, however, "isolation does not alleviate Edna's problem. The isolation of a room does not work because it is first of all incomplete, and more importantly, women do not fundamentally wish to be isolated from society but rather recognized by it and accepted for what they are" (95). Consequently, even the turn to solitude and isolation cannot fulfil Edna's yearning for a true, individual self.

3.2.3 An escape through affairs

Another way Edna seeks to escape the bonds of marriage and reach a new level of independence is through having affairs. Her affair with Robert plays a major part in the novel's plot and initiating her sexual and spiritual awakenings. Their relationship starts off innocent, as Robert is known to devote himself to one lady or another every summer at Grand Isle. Robert is a trusted part of the social scene, as his attentions to wives and daughters are according to Adele not to be taken seriously. Robert even contrasts himself to Alcee Arobin, claiming that he himself is nothing like Alcee, to prove his good intentions (18).

Although Edna and Robert do not act upon their feelings while at Grand Isle, Edna already senses the "first-felt throbbings of desire" (26) toward Robert the night she learns to swim. Apparently frightened by what might happen if their relationship

continues to develop, Robert escapes the situation by carrying out his long time plan of going to Mexico. After Robert has revealed his sudden plans of departure and said his goodbyes to Edna, she "recognized the symptoms of infatuation" (39) for the first time, realising "she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded" (39). As she begins to understand her feelings for Robert, her "newly awakened being" demands something more in terms of love and passion than what her marriage has been able to offer her.

These feelings for Robert are something entirely new to her: "The sentiment which she entertained for Robert in no way resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to feel" (40). Since her expectations of romantic feelings in a marriage are nearly non-existent, the fact that she now yearns for it in a relationship outside marriage suggests that she might feel such happiness to be altogether unattainable within the limiting bonds of marriage.

After returning from Grand Isle, Edna cannot stop thinking about Robert, even when she is involved with Alcee. When the two are reunited at Mademoiselle Reisz' apartment, Edna is confused by why he did not seek her immediately upon his return: "She had pictured him seeking her at the very first hour, and he had lived under the same sky since day before yesterday; while only by accident had he stumbled upon her. Mademoiselle must have lied when she said, 'Poor fool, he loves you'" (81). She is further offended my Robert's claim that he returned since the Mexicans were "not very congenial" (82), and not for her. It turns out, however, that Robert was simply hiding his feelings, since he did not consider pursuing a relationship a realistic option for them.

As Reisz earlier told Edna, Robert is trying to forget her since she is not free to listen to him or belong to him (67). As Victorians, especially those of such high social standing as the Pontelliers, still expected marriage to last until death, divorce was not considered an option. Thus, Robert sees no possible way for them to be together. Edna, however, deems all obstacles possible to overcome, and thinks Robert will change his mind eventually: "She recapitulated the motives which no doubt explained Robert's reserve. They were not insurmountable; they would not hold if he really loved her; they could not hold against her own passion, which he must come to

realize in time" (86). Robert himself describes his inhibitions as such: "you were not free; you were Leonce Pontellier's wife" (90).

Despite these obstacles, the pair finally succumbs to temptation at the pigeon house:

> She leaned over and kissed him – a soft, cool, delicate kiss, whose voluptuous sting penetrated his whole being – then she moved away from him. He followed, and took her in his arms, just holding her close to him. She put her hand up to his face and pressed his cheek against her own. The action was full of love and tenderness. He sought her lips again. Then he drew her down upon the sofa beside him and held her hand in both of his.
>
> "Now you know," he said, "now you know what I have been fighting against since last summer at Grand Isle; what drove me away and drove me back again." (89)

Robert now confesses having come back for her, since he had hoped she might have feelings for him (90). He is even hopeful enough to point out that there have been cases of "men who had set their wives free, we have heard of such things" (90).

Edna, however, has a completely different point of view on the problem that they are facing: "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (90). Robert fails to understand her: "His face grew a little white. 'What do you mean?' he asked" (90). Before Edna has a chance to explain, they are interrupted by Madame Ratignolle calling for Edna. The story reaches its climax, as the lovers part ways:

> "I love you," she whispered, "only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream. Oh! you have made me so unhappy with your indifference. Oh! I have suffered, suffered! Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence. I must go to my friend; but you will wait for me? No matter how late; you will wait for me, Robert?"

> "Don't go; don't go! Oh! Edna, stay with me," he pleaded. "Why should you go? Stay with me, stay with me."
>
> "I shall come back as soon as I can; I shall find you here." She buried her face in his neck, and said good-by again. Her seductive voice, together with his great love for her, had enthralled his senses, had deprived him of every impulse but the longing to hold her and keep her. (90-91)

Edna credits Robert as the initiator of her awakenings, as he was the one that caused her to escape from the oppressive role of a wife and a mother, this past life which she now simply refers to as a "stupid dream". She thinks that they will now finally be together, like she has dreamt. However, when Edna returns home, Robert has left once more, leaving behind only a note saying "I love you. Good-by – because I love you" (94). She has failed to make him understand that she is no longer – or ever was – a possession of her husband, and Robert, fearing the consequences of staying has chosen to leave. Edna is shocked, and lays awake until the next morning. She is still thinking of Robert and his failure to understand, as she drowns herself at the end of the novel. Robert's cowardice is caused by his fear of the consequences of an actual relationship with Edna, which would cause a scandal and a permanently ruined reputation for both to say the least. He chooses the easy way out by leaving.

Edna's affair with Alcee Arobin is very different from the one with Robert. Alcee is a young man of fashion with a widely known bad reputation of being involved with married women. His description with the "perpetual smile in his eyes" and slight insolence (62) matches that of a seducer character. He is drawn to Edna, and pursues her much more aggressively than Robert.

Edna's affair with Alcee is physical, as he evokes her sensuality: "He stood close to her, and the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness" (64). Although Edna is not romantically or emotionally attracted to him, she still allows herself to be seduced by him: "Alcee Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her" (65). Despite not being truly interested in him, Edna still chooses to continue their

friendship, and the two become close. They share two passionate encounters, the first one taking place the same day Edna found out Robert was to return soon.

> His eyes were very near. He leaned upon the lounge with an arm extended across her, while the other hand still rested upon her hair. They continued silently to look into each other's eyes. When he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers.
>
> It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire. (70)

After Alcee leaves that night, Edna cries a little, experiencing an "overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility" (70). She thinks of her husband and Robert, but feels "neither shame nor remorse" (70), only a "dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips" (70). Although Edna has given sex without love a chance, and enjoyed the physical experience, she finds it unsatisfactory as a whole. Still, through this experience she has a further awakening: "Above all, there was understanding. She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (70). Her first truly passionate experience gives her a better understanding of life in general, linking her sexual awakening to a wider increase in her awareness.

The earlier description of Edna's awaked sensuality is at odds with the Victorian notion of female passionlessness. She feels desire, and takes an active role in the experience, clasping Alcee's head, "holding his lips to hers". Edna's choice to take on lovers in its entirety is a manifestation of female sexual selection, a theme that is at odds with the prevailing Darwinist ideas of female passivity in the "sexual struggle". According to Bert Bender, Edna's "accidental" marriage to Leonce suggests that Chopin accepted Darwin's idea that in primitive times women had lost the power of selection (218). However, later on in the novel she takes a significantly more active role, than that which Darwin's theory suggested for women (198). This awakening to the possibility of selection is portrayed as she sends for Robert for the first time in chapter 12, as well as in the general act of choosing the younger, more attractive male, Robert, over her husband (217).

The way Edna deliberately seeks the company of both Robert and Alcee shows how she is exerting power in the sexual realm, instead of having affairs as the result of weakness. She is not portrayed as a powerless victim of seduction, especially in the affair with Robert, but instead she is in charge and chooses her own faith. This strength is also visible in Edna's portrayal, as she is not represented as a fallen woman that is to be pitied, but her descriptions remain positive until the end. For example, during her grand dinner she is described as follows: "There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (74). She is clearly in charge, and is even appointed the grace of a regal woman, despite the facts that at this point in the story she is hopelessly in love with Robert, as well as physically involved with Alcee.

Owing to these affairs, as well as the other influences and consequent awakenings, Edna is growing into an independent, self-aware character. This change is portrayed even in the names that are used of Edna during the novel, as Emily Toth points out, that "The reader's first sight of Edna is through the eyes of her husband" (*Unveiling* 218), as she is called "Mrs. Pontellier". Later, however, "the narrator calls her 'Edna Pontellier' and finally 'Edna,' while the character is 'becoming herself and casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world'" (*Unveiling* 219, quoting *The Awakening* 48).

The first concrete signs of Edna's newfound confidence are manifested the same night she finally learns to swim. She stubbornly refuses to join her husband inside the house despite his multiple requests, ranging from gentle to stern (27).

> Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us …
>
> She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his

> command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did … (27)

Instead of following her husband's requests "unthinkingly", as before, Edna has started to trust her own judgement and think for herself. This is a turning point in the novel, as Edna is beginning to think as Edna, not just Mrs. Pontellier. Having learnt how to swim she feels empowered, as she has discovered a new skill and consequently found confidence in further personal development. Eventually she goes inside of her own will, inviting Leonce to join her.

The next day, a feeling of sudden freedom is expressed through sailing metaphors as Edna is sailing with Robert: "Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening – had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails" (30). The loosening and finally snapping chains of an anchor symbolise her finally breaking out of the bonds of an oppressive marriage. The night before was a turning point for her, leaving her free to pursue other things in life.

When back in the city, she is quick to set her sails toward something new, through pursuing her artistic career and abandoning her domestic duties. As Emily Toth points out, "Respectable women were supposed to stay at home" (*Unveiling* 96), but Edna defies the expectations her husband and the society have for her, now spending the majority of her time either working on her art, or outside the home.

Edna finds an even further level of freedom once Leonce and the children are away. When she is alone, she is relieved, declaring that now "her time was completely her own to do with as she liked" (61). The unfamiliar, yet welcome feeling of being alone and not having to live for others – similarly to Louise in "The Story of an Hour" – is exactly what Edna wanted. As she tries to make it last, by setting up her the pigeon house just for herself, she decides that "whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (67). This again echoes her unwillingness to give herself to her children, as well as feeling like she's being treated as a possession of her husband.

Edna celebrates her new independence with a grand dinner, a rite of transition before her move to the pigeon house. Alcee names the event "the coup d'etat" (71), to emphasise how Edna is overthrowing her husband's control, taking charge herself. She only invites a dozen people close to her, and makes sure everything is most extravagant and elegant: "Oh! it will be very fine; all my best of everything – crystal, silver and gold, Sevres, flowers, music, and champagne to swim in. I'll let Leonce pay the bills. I wonder what he'll say when he sees the bills" (71). Although Edna is very careful not to take to her new house any items that Leonce has bought, and seems otherwise dedicated to becoming financially independent from him, she still sets up this one final moment to spend his money, perhaps trying to shock him into seeing the reality of the situation.

The dinner is beautiful, with abundant decorations (73), and a pleasant, merry atmosphere. However, Edna cannot seem to fully enjoy the event:

> But as she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition. It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords waited. There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable. (74)

Even though she has come this far, and become this independent, there is still the always lingering sense of unattainability – not only of a relationship with Robert, but also of beginning this new life on her own that the dinner party represents. In the end, when she has woken up to the cruel reality of this unattainability, she still thinks that "perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life" (93). Despite not finding a happy ending, Edna does not regret her journey of awakenings.

3.2.4 Her choice of an ending

In the last chapter of the story, Edna returns to Grand Isle. She briefly meets Victor, who is surprised by her arrival as the place is not yet ready for visitors. Edna expresses some wishes for dinner, but seems rather indifferent overall. As she walks to the beach to go for a swim, she is not thinking of anything in particular, as "She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning" (95). Edna has made up her mind, she has decided to die.

On the plot level, Edna's decision has come about due to Robert's departure and his inability to understand Edna's self-proclaimed freedom from her husband. She has made up her mind to commit suicide the same night Robert left, and in her last moments remembers the note he left: "'Good by – because I love you.' He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand" (96). Robert's inability to ever understand Edna symbolises the refusal of the entire patriarchal society to accept her as an independent being, not merely Mrs. Pontellier. As such, as argued by Deborah S. Gentry (22), Edna's suicide is more than just the tragic result of unrequited love, as it represents her escape from the constraints of a patriarchal society.

Although Edna's suicide could be interpreted as merely the desperate act of a woman rejected by her lover, there is evidence to challenge such a simplified reading. Edna's portrayal remains graceful and collected until the very end, in stark contrast for example with the frantic, desperate suicide of Emma Bovary. As Emma's last moments are described through panic, madness and terrible screaming (*Madame Bovary* 319-330), Edna's suicide is much calmer. There is also a difference in how Emma's dead body and its treatment are described in gruesome detail (342-45), whereas Edna is given a more graceful ending. The last lines of *The Awakening*: "The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (96) consist of the peaceful and pleasant imagery of Edna's childhood memories, nothing that would suggest that Edna's decision was desperate and to be condemned. The ending is also left more open to interpretation, as Edna's death is not confirmed. Relying on this ambiguity, Sandra Gilbert claims that Edna is escaping the "empty fictions of marriage and maternity … not into death but back into her own life, back into her

own vision, back into the imaginative openness of her childhood" (qtd. in Gentry 44). In my reading, this possible interpretation is evidence of the more hopeful, positive tone of the ending, but not one I choose to follow.

The fact that Edna commits suicide specifically by drowning is significant in itself. In the Victorian era suicide by drowning was seen as a particularly feminine death, both in arts as in reality. Barbara Gates explains this tendency in her book *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* as follows:

> Suicide by drowning, a common route for those women who did take their own lives, was the way most visual artists and many writers of the Victorian era imagined female suicide. It was as though women drowned in their own tears, or returned to the water of the womb, or, as Freud believed, were delivered of a child when they made their final retreat to water. (135)

This particularly feminine death was also specifically connected to fallen women, as their punishment was often death by drowning: "Fallen women thus drowned in grief or in conjunction to childbearing, both of which were associated with their state and with female fluids in general. In Victorian literature, many fallen women openly acknowledged this affinity with water" (135). Gates gives examples of this tendency in Dickens, as both Martha Endell in *David Copperfield* (1850), as well as Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1838) feel destined to drown (135).

As Elaine Showalter points out, Chopin's contemporaries could anticipate such an ending to a story of female rule breaking: "Readers of the 1890s were well accustomed to drowning as the fictional punishment for female transgression against morality, and most contemporary critics of *The Awakening* thus automatically interpreted Edna's suicide as the wages of sin" ("Tradition and the Female Talent" 22-23). This compliance with the previous literary tradition contributes to the possibility of publishing the novel.

However, although Edna, a fallen woman, ends her life by drowning, her death is not portrayed as a punishment for her misbehaviour. Edna expresses no regrets, and is only saddened by Robert's lack of understanding, not by her own actions. She chooses to die not because of her personal failure, but because the world that surrounds her is not willing to accept her the way she is. She does not only think of

Robert, but also thinks of Leonce and the children: “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (96). Here it is again repeated how her role as a wife and a mother demanded too much of her being, as she should have effaced herself to take on the role of an angelic mother-woman. She is unable to conform to these requirements, and frees herself from this unbearable duty by drowning herself.

Although Edna’s death is not a punishment, as previous literary tradition would imply, her death is foreshadowed by the important connection she has with water in the novel as a whole. Gentry sees the sea as “a major unifying image of the novel” (27), as the sea is “both the symbol of her awakening and the instrument of her death” (27). Edna’s special relationship with water already begins in the beginning of the novel, as Edna is slowly beginning her journey of self-discovery. Much of the early imagery has to do with water:

> The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.
> The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (*The Awakening* 13)

The relationship grows stronger as she learns to swim in chapter 10. Edna had attempted to learn to swim all summer, and when she finally succeeds, “she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with overconfidence” (24). Thus, her finally learning to swim after many attempts is an empowering experience. It starts off an entire series of awakenings, similar experiences that contribute to her newfound confidence in her own abilities. After this experience she finds much joy in water, spending much of her time on the beach, even calling swimming “a diversion which afforded her the only real pleasurable moments that she knew” (39). This new skill as the initiator of her awakenings connects her empowerment to her physical body, not merely her emotional or intellectual qualities. This bodily aspect gives way to her later sexual awakening.

However, Edna's death by drowning is more explicitly foreshadowed in the scene where she learns to swim. She overestimates her strength, swims too far out and panics: "A quick vision of death smote her soul" (25), and afterwards the experience is referred to as "her encounter with death" (25). This scene is also referred to in the final scene of the novel, strengthening the connection between the two events: "She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on" (96). Gentry sees the connection between these scenes as evidence for her claim that "Edna's end has been made necessary by her beginning" (43), as her suicide is the only available way for her to reach her goal of self-assertion.

The end scene is not portrayed as a tragic end to an unfortunate story of a woman that has succumbed to temptation, a fallen woman, but as a choice made by Edna. Here it is useful to consider the alternative approaches to suicide described by Gentry (see section 2.2.3). The different types of suicide that she differentiates include suicide as a choice of free will, an involuntary result of weakness, and a woman's escape from the impossible constraints of a patriarchal society (2-4). Although Edna can be seen as having a weak moment at the end of the story, her actions are presented as the results of her own choice and deliberation. She chooses to end her own life, instead of dying as the involuntary consequence of her previous actions. Her suicide is in fact an act of free will, as well as an escape from a patriarchal society. Edna refuses to compromise her own identity, and is left with no other option than suicide.

3.3 "The Storm": Calixta, unfaithful but happy

"The Storm" is a sequel to Chopin's short story "At the 'Cadian Ball" (1892), written nearly six years after its prequel. "At the 'Cadian Ball" tells the story of young Cajuns[1] trying to find suitable partners to marry. The central character is the belle of

[1] Cajuns are an ethnic group that consists of the descendants of French-speaking Acadians, refugees from Nova Scotia, Canada, in the mid-1700s. Cajuns mainly settled in the U.S. state of Louisiana (*Unveiling* 139).

the ball Calixta, who is struggling with her choice between the clumsy but good-natured Bobinôt and the much more handsome and charismatic Alcée. Calixta and Alcée have already shared passionate moments earlier, stirring a small scandal in the community. The couple is reunited at the ball, but their reminiscing of their earlier encounter and the continued flirtation is interrupted by Alcée's jealous cousin, Clarisse, who has also in the past been his lover. Calixta ends up leaving the ball with Bobinôt, indifferently giving in to his wishes to marry her: "You been sayin' all along you want to marry me, Bobinôt, Well, if you want, yet, I don' care, me" (310).

In "The Storm", the same characters are depicted later on in life. Calixta has now married Bobinôt, and they have a young child called Bibi. Alcée has in turn married Clarisse, and the couple also has children. Calixta is, however, reunited with Alcée by chance, as a storm forces the two to take shelter in her house when Bobinôt and Bibi are out running errands. Although the sudden arrival of the storm initially causes panic in Calixta, who is worried about where her husband and child are taking shelter, Alcée soon calms her down by taking her in his arms. The old feelings are quickly reignited, as the ex-lovers share another brief yet passionate encounter. The two part with smiles and laughter before Bobinôt and Bibi return home. Although Bobinôt is preparing explanations and apologies on their way, Calixta welcomes them in an unusually good mood, making the entire family relax and laugh together at dinner. Alcée writes a loving letter to his wife that night, telling her and the children to stay away at Biloxi for a month longer if they so choose. Clarissa receives the news with pleasure, as although she is devoted to her husband, she is glad to take a break from their intimate relations for a while longer. All in all, everyone is happier than at the beginning of the story, summed up by the bold final sentence: "So the storm passed and every one was happy" (931).

"The Storm" is different from the stories discussed above, primarily because Chopin did not even attempt to publish it. "The Storm" was first published in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (1969), over seventy years after it was written, and sixty-five years after Chopin's death (Toth, *Unveiling* 98). The fact that there is no evidence that Chopin even attempted to publish "The Storm" suggests that she must have acknowledged that the story would not be accepted by her contemporaries, especially after the poor reception of her other story on adultery, *The Awakening*. Both the

content and the language in “The Storm” go even further against what was considered acceptable. According to Toth, Chopin knew that such openly sexual language, especially as it was used to present adultery in a positive light, would not have been accepted by publishers (*Unveiling* 206). The fact that she wrote this story, despite not attempting to get it published, suggests that she still saw the themes discussed in it as important. By going against the prevailing literary conventions, “The Storm” discusses many controversial issues, mostly in connection with women’s sexual liberation.

The way female sexuality is openly portrayed and celebrated in “The Storm” goes against the norms of the Victorian era. As women were considered innately passionless (see 2.1.3), portraying a female character that enjoys sex was openly against the prevailing stereotype. Calixta clearly shows passion and desire toward Alcée: “As she glanced up at him the fear in her liquid blue eyes had given place to a drowsy gleam that unconsciously betrayed a sensuous desire” (928). Like Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, Calixta experiences a sexual awakening, as “Her firm, elastic flesh … was knowing for the first time its birthright” (929). The act between Calixta and Alcée is described in much detail, using openly sexual language: “When he touched her breasts they gave themselves up in quivering ecstasy, inviting his lips. Her mouth was a fountain of delight. And when he possessed her, they seemed to swoon together at the very borderland of life’s mystery” (929). Calixta’s enjoyment in particular is emphasised in the story.

Calixta does not only enjoy the affair, but also plays an active part in it. Instead of being a passive participant or a weak victim of seduction, Calixta also takes an active role in the events: “With one hand she clasped his head, her lips lightly touching his forehead. The other hand stroked with a soothing rhythm his muscular shoulders” (929). Such a daring representation of female sexuality and pleasure would most likely have been considered unacceptable in Chopin’s social situation.

However, the entire meeting between Calixta and Alcée is described positively from the beginning to the end. For example, as Alcée leaves Calixta’s house after their encounter, they are both happy, and the imagery is positive in tone: “The rain was over; and the sun was turning the glistening green world into a palace of gems. Calixta, on the gallery, watched Alcée ride away. He turned and smiled at her with a

beaming face; and she lifted her pretty chin in the air and laughed aloud" (929). This positive tone and the portrayal of joy caused by the brief affair suggests that perhaps female sexuality should not be such a taboo, but should be seen more positively as a potential source of joy. By telling such a controversial story with such a light tone, Chopin was challenging the prevailing ideas of female sexuality and purity.

Such a celebration of passion and sexual pleasure was not typical in the Victorian era, as sex, especially for women, was considered practically inseparable from reproduction. However, by stating that Calixta's body was "knowing for the first time its birthright" (929), Chopin states that women have a right to sexual pleasure, separating sex from reproduction. According to Estelle B. Freedman, erotic sexuality, separate from reproduction, presented a central issue in nineteenth-century America (197). Sex for the sake of pleasure was typically not considered acceptable, even in fiction, as "Most Victorian authors emphasized the need to control eroticism" (204).

The content and language of "The Storm", however, clearly resemble erotic literature. Dennis Allen characterises the general treatment of erotic themes in the nineteenth century in his book *Sexuality in Victorian Fiction* as discreet, and rarely directly narrated (3-4). As sexuality was considered "chaotic" (8) and "outside the orderly realm of 'culture' or 'civilization,' associated instead with the disorder of 'nature' and savage instincts" (8), Victorian writers had to restrain from offending the public. Respectable writers could not openly discuss sexual themes without damaging their reputations, so most erotic literature in the nineteenth century was written either anonymously or under a pseudonym. Female authors especially had to follow very strict rules concerning what they could write about, otherwise risking punishments as harsh as social isolation (López-Rodríguez 40).

Nonetheless, discussing controversial sexual topics was not unusual for New Woman writers. According to Ann Heilmann, they "frequently employed sensational plot elements (cross-dressing, prostitution, syphilis, madness) in exploring feminist themes (the social construction of gender, the sexual exploitation of women, the perils of marriage)" ("*The Awakening*" 89). Because of this, some considered some New Woman novels to be a part of the "overworked field of sex fiction" (90). Heilmann sees the criticism aimed at *The Awakening* at the time of its publishing as

part of this general disapproval. Therefore, if the sensual content of *The Awakening* was considered too outrageous, keeping "The Storm" unpublished must have been the only option for Chopin.

One aspect of "The Storm" that alone would have deemed it unpublishable is the explicit sexual language it contains. In comparison with works by Chopin that were published during her lifetime, there is a clear difference. The sexual or erotic scenes in stories such as "At the 'Cadian Ball" and *The Awakening* are much more subtle, no directly sexual language is used, and most of the events are left to interpretation. Moreover, in *The Awakening* much of the sensual content is more symbolic. One example of this is Edna's connection with water, as the sea was commonly used as a symbol of female passion in women's fiction (Heilmann, "*The Awakening*" 99). By comparing "The Storm" to other works by Chopin, the difference in directness is clear.

For instance, even though "At the 'Cadian Ball" deals with the controversial subject matter of premarital affairs, the language remains rather restrained. The most sensual expression describes how "Calixta's senses were reeling; and they well-nigh left her when she felt Alcée's lips brush her ear like the touch of a rose" (308). Directly after this they are interrupted by Clarissa, leaving what would otherwise have happened unclear. Also the topic of their previous encounter in Assumption is treated discreetly. The hints given are the small scandal they caused in their community (302) and how Alcée reminds Calixta of their meeting: "it was nice – *hein,* Calixta? in Assumption?" (308). Something has certainly happened between the two, but the exact nature of the events is left to the reader's imagination.

The sensual scenes in *The Awakening* are also much more subtle than the one in "The Storm", as much of those scenes are left for the reader to fill in the gaps. As Edna first has a sexual encounter with Alcee, a major part of the events is omitted, as chapter 27 ends in Edna kissing Alcee and feeling desire, and the next chapter begins with her crying after his departure (70). The continuation of Edna's affair with Alcee is also hinted at later on in chapter 31, as Alcee will not leave Edna's side, "until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties" (77), but there is no certain evidence given of the physical side of their relationship after that. Although both stories deal with extramarital sex, only "The Storm", as an unpublished work, could

include such openly sexual language during Chopin's lifetime. Both "At the 'Cadian Ball" and *The Awakening* resort to hinting instead of showing, in order to remain acceptable for publishing.

By comparing the language used in "The Storm" with the language in "At the 'Cadian Ball" and *The Awakening*, its exceptional nature is highlighted. The language used in "The Storm" is much more direct and daring, as little is left to the imagination. Even the earlier events in Assumption, only hinted at in its prequel, are clarified: "for in Assumption he had kissed her and kissed and kissed her; until his senses would well nigh fail, and to save her he would resort to a desperate flight" (928-929). The events in Assumption were very passionate, but ended in Alcée's sudden departure before they went any further. The events described in "The Storm", do not have a similar layer of mystery to them, as the characters' feelings as well as the physical act are described in much detail, and nothing is merely hinted at. The expressions used to describe Calixta and Alcée's encounter, such as "When he touched her breasts they gave themselves up in quivering ecstasy, inviting his lips" (929), are not only more direct, but also much more erotic than the language in "At the 'Cadian Ball" or *The Awakening*.

Like the language, the content of "The Storm" is also bolder. Whereas "At the 'Cadian Ball" deals with the topic of finding a suitable partner to marry, the characters in "The Storm" are more mature and married. Instead of premarital sex, the topic is extramarital sex. However, the events of "The Storm" are much more daring than the ones in its prequel. There are still some aspects of "At the 'Cadian Ball" that have been found to challenge the prevailing sexual ideologies of Chopin's time. Bert Bender has argued that there is evident "female sexual selection", in opposition to the prevailing Darwinistic ideas of male sexual selection, in "At the 'Cadian Ball", as Clarissa takes a dominant role and goes out of her way to keep Alcée for herself, and Calixta chooses Bobinôt as her husband (Bender 206). Still, the subject matter is more restrained, as the story centres more on flirtation and courtship than sex. In "The Storm", on the other hand, the content is much more straightforwardly sexual. Calixta again takes an active role, as she shows her passion and enjoyment. Furthermore, in "The Storm", sex is portrayed explicitly as a source

of enjoyment. This makes it more clearly controversial, than the depiction of female sexual selection in "At the 'Cadian Ball".

Although in both "The Storm" and *The Awakening* the main female characters experience a sexual awakening, Calixta's experience is celebrated, whereas Edna's situation is presented as more complicated. As Edna kisses Alcee for the first time, she enjoys "the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded" (70), Calixta has a similar experience, when **"**Her firm, elastic flesh … was knowing for the first time its birthright**"** (929). Although Edna does find enjoyment in the physical relationship she has with Alcee Arobin, their relationship is not represented as unproblematic. Edna is unsatisfied with their relationship after realising she also needs love, not only sex. In "The Storm" the issue is treated differently, as Calixta's affair with Alcee is only shown to bring positive things in all the characters' lives, as sex is represented without the complications of love. Furthermore, Calixta's sexual awakening does not end in death, unlike Edna's story. Such an unconventional ending would surely have been even more shocking to Chopin's contemporaries than that of *The Awakening*.

Certainly one of the biggest differences between the stories of *The Awakening* and "The Storm" are the way they end. Even though Edna Pontellier's death at the end of *The Awakening* does not read as a punishment for her actions, she still has no other option than to die. "The Storm", however, ends happily, as all the characters in the story are happier at the end of the story than at its beginning. The atmosphere and the moods of the characters are described in very positive words. The adjectives, such as "charmed" and "pleasant" (931), as well as the verbs, "relax", "enjoy" and "laugh" (930) are all very calm and give a peaceful and merry impression of the situation. Any words that would suggest that the happiness is only temporary and that something ominous is on its way are completely absent in the story.

As according to the contemporary literary conventions fallen women were supposed to die or be otherwise severely punished, the ending of "The Storm" is certainly its most radical part. The adultery has seemingly had no negative consequences, and it is not portrayed in any judgemental tone whatsoever. The sexual encounter between Calixta and Alcée is described using exclusively positive words. Neither Calixta nor Alcée face any punishment for their actions, and even both their families are happier

at the end of the story than at its beginning. The final sentence of the story, “So the storm passed and every one was happy” (931), emphasises the unconventional ending, by explicitly stating that it is a happy one.

This unconventional treatment of adultery, more specifically the positive portrayal of a fallen woman, suggests implied societal commentary. Calixta, a sexual being, is not treated as a weak victim of seduction, who has to deal with the negative consequences of her actions, but as an individual happier than at the beginning of the story. As she is still described in positive light even after being unfaithful to her husband, Calixta is allowed sexual freedom and the power over her own decisions. This sexual freedom Calixta is given in this story is linked to the ideas of sexual freedom typical to the New Woman writers of 1890s (see section 2.3). Many New Woman writers claimed that women’s passions were equal to men’s, as they celebrated female sexuality. By presenting Calixta’s desire and passion as equal to those of Alcée, Chopin is arguing against the prevailing ideas of female passionlessness, as well as for further openness toward women’s sexuality and sexual freedom. By not following the usual pattern of punishing the woman, Chopin creates a more positive, equal world in “The Storm”, where neither participant in the act of adultery is punished. By going against the literary tradition of her time, Chopin makes a strong statement in support of female sexuality, as well as against the harsh treatment of unconventional female characters, both in fiction and in reality.

The fact that “The Storm” was not published during Chopin’s lifetime, and therefore did not have to undergo any possible censorship, made possible the daring description of the act itself, as well as a freer look at the subject as a whole. The fact that Chopin wrote this story and kept it unpublished may suggest that this story contains a more authentic representation of her ideas on the subject. A piece like this could not be published at the time, but Chopin wrote it anyway, perhaps to voice a more unfettered and liberal perspective on the theme as a whole. Chopin does not condemn the unfaithful wife – or the unfaithful husband – and ends the story on a light note, suggesting that perhaps sexual liberation should not be such a taboo topic in literature or society as a whole.

4 Conclusion

Having looked at these three works in their social and literary context, a better understanding of the underlying commentary on the gender politics of the time has been achieved. Chopin commented on several contemporary issues, including women's role, and oppressive ideas on marriages and women's sexuality. She also resisted literary conventions by going against the usual patterns for female characters in fiction.

One of the central ideologies of the 19th century that Chopin was criticising was the way married women were limited to the private sphere. Having herself experienced both the life of a married mother, as well as an independent woman working outside the home, Chopin had a rare understanding of both worlds, which she took advantage of in her writing. In "The Story of an Hour" Chopin tells the story of a wife who is not content with her place, and takes this starting point even further in *The Awakening*. Challenging the ideal characteristics of a Victorian woman, pious, pure and domestic, Chopin depicts the disobeying protagonist of *The Awakening* in a celebratory, positive light. Chopin's message is clear, motherhood and a domestic life are not enough for her female characters, as they are yearning for something more.

As Chopin was critical of married women's place in the society, she was naturally also critical of marriage. Although the husbands in "The Story of an Hour" and *The Awakening* are portrayed as caring and kind, the wives are still unhappy. By not portraying the husbands themselves as malevolent, Chopin criticised marriage itself, as an institution of oppression that deprived women of many possibilities. Louise in "The Story of an Hour" expresses this lack of opportunities and a yearning for something more by reacting unexpectedly to her husband's sudden death, whereas Edna in *The Awakening* takes action to build a new life for herself without her husband and their children. *The Awakening* also touches upon the controversial nature of divorce, as Edna's lover, Robert, fails to even consider divorce as an option.

Sexuality is also a central theme in Chopin's works, as both Edna in *The Awakening*, as well as Calixta in "The Storm" experience a sexual awakening. As women's sexuality was a topic mostly discussed in connection with reproduction, the portrayals of sex for pleasure were ahead of Chopin's time. It took decades before Chopin's daring representations of female sexuality were accepted, and according to Toth, Chopin has been viewed as a pioneering writer about sex, especially thanks to "The Storm" ("What we do and don't know" 15). By challenging the prevailing attitudes about women being innately passionless, and portraying female characters playing an active role in sexual selection, Chopin makes a strong statement for women's sexual liberation, and their right to establish their own sexual autonomy.

In addition to challenging dominant ideologies on gender and sexuality, Chopin also challenged the prevailing literary tradition of the 19th century. Unlike the female authors of popular sentimentalist fiction, Chopin discussed motherhood and the feminine sphere in a critical way. Edna Pontellier is perhaps the best example of this, as she both mentally and physically leaves the feminine sphere of the family home, challenging what is expected of her.

As such, Chopin's female characters did not fit the common stereotypes of virtuous and fallen women. As women were often categorised into either virtuous "good girl" characters or as sexually deviant fallen women, the positive representations of Edna in *The Awakening* and Calixta in "The Storm" challenge this division. Furthermore, by exploring both "angel" and "monster" type female characters in *The Awakening*, and deeming both unsuitable paths for the female protagonist, Chopin deems those types inadequate.

Although *The Awakening* does conform to the literary conventions of the time to an extent, as the story ends in the death of the female rule breaker, Edna's description remains positive, at times even triumphant, throughout the novel. Edna's suicide is not a punishment for her actions, but instead she is in charge of her actions even at the very end. Chopin does not condemn Edna in *The Awakening* nor Calixta in "The Storm" for their infidelity, but instead presents them as individuals that are able to make their own decisions. By allowing them agency, Chopin also challenges the prevailing ideas of women's weakness at the hands of men. Chopin's unfaithful

wives are in charge of their own lives and bodies, and portrayed much more positively than, for example, Emma in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

Nonetheless, the undeniably happy ending of "The Storm" goes even further than *The Awakening* in challenging the norms of literature on adultery in the late nineteenth-century. By telling the story of a "fallen" woman whose marriage seems to even have grown stronger after her infidelity, Chopin questions the double standards in relation to the literary treatment of openly sexual female characters. She portrays women's sexuality in a positive way, creating the grounds for a readership that is more accepting than that of her own time. Furthermore, the daring language and description of the events singlehandedly places "The Storm" at a further level of disobedience to the contemporary literary conventions than that of "The Story of an Hour" and *The Awakening*.

By going against many of the prevailing traditions, many of Chopin's themes and topics resemble the New Woman movement that reached its height in the 1890s. Although Chopin did not overtly identify as a New Woman writer, her treatment of female sexuality and a women's independence from their husbands clearly resonate with the ideas of the movement. Like other New Woman characters, Edna Pontellier strives for both economic and sexual independence in *The Awakening*.

After being brought to the attention of a wider audience, Chopin's fiction has been discussed widely in hundreds of studies, though more is still to be discovered. By looking at Chopin's writing more extensively, going beyond her most popular works, other themes and implied critiques might be discovered. As Chopin was a prolific writer of short stories, writing altogether over 100 stories during her entire career, perhaps not all aspects of her writing have been brought to critical attention.

The continued theme of women escaping their expected role and fighting for their right to make their own decisions is one that Chopin returned to in many of her stories, and can be identified in many other works than those primarily focused on in this study. Starting from the early work, "Emancipation: A Life Fable", Chopin explored the theme of becoming independent, and not taking the easy, expected path in life. Most of her protagonists are women, often unhappy in their situations and looking for something more, an escape from their symbolic cages, such as marriage

and motherhood. These continued themes and topics prove how passionate she was about the subject of unhappy, oppressive marriages and women's rights, both in the public, economic, and the most private areas of life.

Chopin strove for a world in which women are not limited to the private sphere, hiding their own identities behind those of a wife and mother. Her female characters are strong, passionate and determined, unable to efface themselves the way the mother-women do on Grand Isle. Like Louise in "The Story of an Hour", they discover that self-assertion is the strongest impulse of their being. Chopin's women refuse to conform to the expectations set for them by society, and like the animal in "Emancipation", refuse to return to their cages.

Chopin's fiction rebelled against the norms of her time, and as a consequence she suffered harsh criticism. The fact that her works were only widely accepted and celebrated more than sixty years after her death shows that she was writing about themes and topics well ahead of her time. Her continuing relevance over a hundred years after her death proves the timelessness of her writing, as well as the continued need for feminist literature.

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